CORONET

BARRY NORMAN

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STICKY WICKET

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Over 21

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'To quote from a passage in the book . . . "The man from *Time Out* thinks it's a masterpiece . . ." Well he would, wouldn't he?'

Time Out

ABOUT THE AUTHOR:

Barry Norman started his career as a reporter on the *Kensington News*, from where he progressed, via spells in South Africa and Rhodesia, to the *Daily Mail* and the *Guardian*. A regular newspaper, magazine and radio contributor, he is probably best known for his cinema programmes on BBC television, among them Film '84 and the Hollywood Greats. STICKY WICKET is his seventh novel. His wife Diana is a novelist and they have two daughters.

Sticky Wicket

Barry Norman

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For MAMF
with all my love

1

Every cricket team consists of one captain and ten critics. Win, lose or draw the former is always wrong, while the latter, being blessed with the clear 20–20 hindsight that is nature's gift to every critic in whatever sphere, are invariably right. If the captain had only listened to them the defeat could have been avoided, the draw turned into a victory and the victory made even more emphatic. Indeed, if the captain had the sense to take heed of his critics there is no reason why any cricket team in the world should ever lose a match.

The Martindale XI, having the same components as any other team and being cursed, like any other team, with a captain too unimaginative to perceive before a game what his critics could see so clearly afterwards, tended as a consequence to finish most seasons with an average sort of record, which is to say that it won some, lost some and drew the rest.

The present game, thought Andrew Weston as he pottered about at mid-off performing the usual valet duties for the bowler, looked like ending in a draw, although of course it could so easily be different if only Jake Ponsonby, the skipper, would bring him on to bowl. Briefly he toyed with the idea of suggesting this but then prudence asserted itself and he thought better of it. The one thing the careful critic never does is put himself in the line of fire. Far better to wait until the game was over and then accost old Jake in the bar and point out the exact moment when he lost control of the game, the moment in short when he failed to bring Andrew on to bowl.

The batsman leaned forward in a convulsive prod and

the ball rolled slowly along the ground in Andrew's direction. He strolled forward a few paces, picked it up, rubbed it absent-mindedly on his groin and returned it to the bowler. He liked fielding at mid-off. It kept you close enough to the wicket to be involved in what was going on and now and then there was the chance of a catch. But most of the time it was a fairly peaceful occupation that merely involved fetching and carrying for the bowler. Fielding at mid-off kept you in the game without imposing too many demands; it was infinitely preferable to being out in the deep where, generally speaking, long periods of tedium were occasionally punctuated by moments of frantic activity as you pursued a hard-hit hook, pull, drive or simple heave to the boundary urged on by some such encouraging shout from the bowler as, "For Christ's sake, run for it, you silly sod."

The umpire called "Over" and Jake Ponsonby tossed the ball to Andrew. "Fancy your chances?" he asked.

"Sure," said Andrew without hesitation. The situation was perfect. Whatever happened now, Jake was wrong again. If Andrew was hammered all over the ground and the game was lost, it could always be attributed later to Jake's ludicrous decision – unprompted by Andrew, let it be remembered – to bring him on to bowl on what was palpably not his wicket. If on the other hand the game should be won through Andrew then clearly Jake could be accused of having very nearly thrown victory away by not giving him his chance earlier.

Andrew flexed his shoulders, informed the umpire and anyone else who might be remotely interested that he was about to bowl left arm over the wicket and retreated some half dozen paces to begin his run-up. The batsman now about to receive was a short, squat man in grubby flannels who crouched low over his bat with a menacing scowl and who, having been in for well over an hour, had amassed thirteen runs. He was known to the Martindale team as "the Squirter", since the only apparent shot in his repertoire was a kind of forward jerk that sent the ball squirting off the bottom of his bat in an arc that went behind the wicket from point to short square leg. He didn't score

many runs this way but the fielding side loathed him deeply because he was remarkably difficult to remove and what added to their irritation was the fact that he seemed to be very proud of his ungainly method.

"See that?" he would cry, whenever his squirt eluded leg-slip or gully and brought him a run. "I placed it there, I did. I knew t'ball was going there. That's my favourite shot, is that." Since he never seemed to score more than one run at a time Andrew and the rest of the fielders had now heard this boast on thirteen occasions and they had grown very tired of both it and the curious, rather indeterminate north country accent in which it was uttered.

"Play," said the umpire. Andrew jogged to the wicket and bowled a loosener, an unambitious delivery which pitched on a reasonable length just outside the off stump and did nothing of note. The Squirter jerked forward and missed it as did the wicket-keeper, Jake's son Elvis, whose wicket-keeping style, as Andrew had often remarked, was based on that of the Ancient Mariner, who stoppeth one of three. On this occasion, even though the ball was not one of the two an over which, by the law of averages, Elvis might reasonably be expected to stop with his gloves, little harm was done. The ball struck the knee of his right pad and bounced back onto the wicket, removing the bails, and Elvis, with great presence of mind, immediately shouted "Owzat!" even though the Squirter was standing alongside him behind the stumps at the time.

"Quick thinking, that," Elvis said to the slips as the square leg umpire came in to replace the bails. "See, I knew I couldn't get it with me gloves on account of the awkward bounce so I thought I'd sort of knee it onto the wicket. Nearly had the bugger, too."

For someone who had been inflicted with his Christian name by a rock 'n' roll crazy mother long after the original Elvis had been supplanted in popular adulation by the Beatles and who might, therefore, with decent luck have been asked to go through life with no more unfortunate a name than Ringo, Elvis Ponsonby had an enviable degree of self-confidence. Since he had come into the Martindale XI two years ago at the age of sixteen various attempts

had been made by the chorus of critics to remove him from the role of wicket-keeper. All had failed; partly because he was, after all, the captain's son and in the village of Martindale Jake Ponsonby was not a man to cross since he ran the only shop and had it within his power to give or withhold credit and partly because Elvis himself had half-persuaded his senior team-mates that they were distinctly old-fashioned in expecting a wicket-keeper to stop the ball with his hands. Legs, Elvis had told them firmly, legs and pads were the important parts of a 'keeper's equipment these days. What was needed was mobility and footwork tricky enough to nudge or kick the ball onto the stumps. You only had to watch the John Player League matches of a Sunday afternoon, he said, to see that. Some of his team-mates had indeed watched John Player League matches on TV, paying particular attention to the antics of the wicket-keepers to test his theory, but though they found it untenable they all decided in the end to say nothing, bearing in mind Jake's power of credit. The nearest town with both banks and a reasonable shopping centre was nearly ten miles from Martindale and Jake and his credit system were an indispensable part of daily life for most of the village wives. A husband who offended Elvis, and therefore Jake, and had the family credit withdrawn for a month was not, on the whole, likely to be a very happy husband.

"Hard luck, Elvis," Andrew said, tactfully, and prepared to bowl the second ball of his over. To this one, now that he had so swiftly found both length and direction, he determined to impart all the powers of spin, flight and general devilry at his command, with the intention of pitching it around middle and leg and turning it enough to hit the off stump. To this end he ran briskly to the wicket and used both wrist and fingers to give the ball a most tremendous tweak. It pitched a trifle short about middle and off and, without deviating one millimetre from its line of trajectory, bounced a little bit and struck the forward-jerking Squirter solidly on the nose.

"Howzaaat!" yelled Andrew.

The umpire, the father-in-law of a friend of one of the

Martindale team who had come merely to watch the game and had been press-ganged into his present office, leaned forward and peered intently down the wicket. "What, er, what precisely are you appealing *for*?" he asked.

"Leg before wicket," said Andrew.

"Leg before wicket!" cried the Squirter in a muffled voice, his bat abandoned on the pitch, one gloved hand clamped firmly to his face. "It didn't hit me leg, yer great lummox, it hit me fookin' nose. You can't be out nose before fookin' wicket!"

"An interesting shout," said the umpire to Andrew. "How exactly do you justify it?"

"Well, he crouches low over his bat," said Andrew. "That ball would have hit his middle stump. He's a short man, after all."

"Not that short," said the umpire. "Nobody is."

"No, look at it this way," Andrew said. "He never comes very far forward at the best of times and he's bent practically double before he even starts, so I reckon . . ."

The Squirter was now lying flat on his back, well out of his crease, with a handkerchief pressed to his nose. There was a considerable amount of blood all over his face and shirt and even on the pitch.

"Don't you think we ought to do something for him?" asked the umpire.

Andrew shot a quick look in the Squirter's direction. "What? Oh no, he'll be all right. Listen . . ."

Elvis, holding the ball in his hand and seeing the Squirter recumbent well out of his ground, gazed wistfully towards Andrew. "Shall I stump him?" he said.

Andrew thought about it. "No, better not," he said. "It might be considered unsporting." He turned back to the umpire. "Now what about my appeal?"

"You can't be nose before fookin' wicket!" yelled the Squirter in a voice liquid with blood from his horizontal position on the pitch. "You just fookin' can't!"

Andrew turned a shade impatiently to the umpire. "Well," he said "is he out or isn't he?"

Slowly the umpire shook his head. "Nice idea," he said. "But on the whole I think not."

The decision in any case was academic, for the Squirter was bleeding too profusely to continue his innings. Two of his team-mates had rushed from the pavilion and now they were escorting him solicitously from the pitch. "Bodyline bowling," mumbled the Squirter from behind his blood-soaked handkerchief, "that's what it were – bloody bodyline bowling!"

Andrew, robbed of what he considered to have been an honourable wicket, yelled after him. "Don't be an ass. I'm a left-arm spinner. A left-arm spinner can't bowl bodyline."

"Spinner, are yer?" said the Squirter, removing his handkerchief and allowing blood to pour unfettered down his mouth and chin. "That's fookin' news to me, that is. I didn't see much fookin' spin on that ball, mate." And having delivered himself of this deeply wounding remark he replaced the handkerchief and allowed himself to be taken away for first aid.

After that the game was swiftly over. With the accidental removal of the Squirter there were only four more wickets to fall and the batsmen who followed him were equally bemused by the slowness of Andrew at one end and the brisk military medium of Henry Tyson at the other. Andrew took three of the wickets and Henry the fourth and Martindale won the game comfortably.

Half an hour after it was over, having showered and changed and asked the captain of the opposing team to give their best wishes to the Squirter as he lay in hospital, Andrew and Henry stood at the bar in the pavilion, each with a glass of bitter in his hand.

Close by, the opposition was conducting its post-mortem. "I'll tell you where you went wrong, skipper," the opening batsman was saying. The fact that he had been dismissed first ball in no way deterred him from proffering his opinion. "Your big mistake was putting me in first on a wicket like that . . ."

Henry Tyson raised his glass towards Andrew. "Cheers," he said, adding, "You had a good game."

"Not bad," Andrew said. He had scored 29 very quick

runs, including three hefty sixes, and taken three for 11 in five overs. "You did okay, too."

Henry nodded modestly. He had, in fact, done even better than Andrew, having scored 47 and taken four wickets for 22 in two separate spells. "Result that counts, though," he said. "Nice to go into the big one next week with a good win under our belts."

The thought of the big one – the village against the President's Invitation XI – filled Andrew with gloom, for the President and also the nearest thing Martindale had seen to a squire in nearly a century was his father-in-law, Arthur McCulper. The village had been free of squires, or anyone with pretensions to being a squire, since 1893 when the local manor house had caught fire reducing itself and its widely disliked owner to ashes. Since then Martindale had gone its way, happily squireless, until four years ago when Arthur McCulper had moved in, built an enormous neo-Elizabethan house on a ten-acre site and made it clear that whether Martindale liked it or not it had a squire, or something virtually indistinguishable from a squire, once more. Furthermore, McCulper's ten-acre holding, acquired by auction from the estate of a deceased farmer, included the cricket pitch and its pavilion. The late owner had been whole-heartedly a village man and a cricket man and between him and the cricket club had existed an unruffled cordiality. As the owner of the ground he had been by right the club's president; but he had also been its happy servant. If the cricketers needed new equipment he could be counted upon to provide most of it; if the outfield needed mowing, he would have it mowed; if a new trophy had to be provided – for the most promising young player or the keenest club man – he would provide it. And in return he asked nothing, save the honour of being president and the pleasure of being able to sit in the sun with his cronies on a Saturday or a Sunday afternoon and watch the game from a place of mild privilege just in front of the pavilion. The idea of recruiting his own eleven to play the village had never occurred to him. It would have seemed positively disloyal to him even to contemplate

bringing together a scratch eleven which might conceivably defeat his beloved Martindale.

But then he had died, widowed and childless. His arable and grazing land had been bought by a gentleman farmer who regarded the whole business as tax deductible and who was, anyway, much more interested in increasing his fortune as an underwriter. The farm house and the ten acres around it had been acquired by Arthur McCulper who, having been born and bred in Wimbledon and having made his money in advertising, now fancied himself in the role of rural squire. He had torn down the old farmhouse, put up a monstrosity in its place and declared his willingness to be the local Master of Foxhounds. That was his first mistake. There was no hunt within twenty miles of Martindale, nor was there any local interest in starting one. Apart from a few chicken owners most people in the village rather liked foxes.

This lack of interest in what he regarded as traditional country pastimes came as a grave disappointment to Arthur McCulper. Until he moved to Martindale his own knowledge of rustic life had come from *Tom Jones* – and not even the novel but the film. He had moved in vaguely expecting buxom wenches to be offered to him and a great deal of forelock-touching to go on whenever he passed by. Neither of these things happened. For more than a year indeed he went unrecognised in the village except as the man who had built that awful house. He tried to buy popularity by giving money to the local church which accepted it gratefully but then refused to grant him a private pew on the grounds that it was certainly undemocratic and, in modern terms, probably un-Christian, too. He then turned to more secular matters by donating a handsome sum towards an extension to the village hall and was deeply embittered when nobody even considered naming it after him.

In the end, denied buxom wenches, forelock-tugging, a private pew or even a couple of lousy rooms that bore his name, he turned against Martindale and determined to hit it where it hurt. Village life revolved, as village life so often does, around the church, the pub, the Women's

Institute and the cricket team. McCulper had failed with the church and had no influence at all over the pub and even he was not optimistic enough to think that he could gain control of the Women's Institute. So he decided to attack the cricket team by challenging it to an annual match against his, the President's, XI. He didn't want to be President of the cricket club but the office had, of course, come to him automatically along with ownership of the ground. If the truth were told he hated the cricket club; he didn't even like cricket very much, though he understood the game well enough.

But when he saw how much involved all these people who refused to offer him their daughters or curtsey or pull their forelocks to him or call him squire, when he saw how involved they were in the fortunes of their cricket club, he also saw how to gain his revenge. Every year he would get together an Invitation XI to play the village. It would be a gala occasion with beer tents and tea tents and an ox-roast on the green afterwards and he would foot the bill and, for this one day of the year at least, everyone would know he was the squire. But most of all it would be an occasion of intense humiliation for the Martindale cricket team, for he would choose an eleven of such prowess that long before a ball had been bowled the village wouldn't be in there with the remotest chance of winning.

And so, over the past three years, it had transpired. In the first game Martindale had been dismissed for 53 and the President's Invitation XI, including two stockbrokers who had played for England only fifteen years previously, had won by 203 runs. In the second, the village had lost by eight wickets. And in the third game, last year, Martindale had done very well in restricting the opposition to 159 runs but had then been skittled out for 31 by a minor diplomat who used to bowl leg-breaks for India.

At the ox-roast after that third game as the villagers and their team drank the beer that had been provided for them and the President's XI and their wives and girl friends drank the wine and spirits that had been provided for them and McCulper grew arrogantly drunk on the fine old brandy that had been reserved exclusively for

him, Jake Ponsonby had suggested that in the interests of making a decent match of it, the President might consider bringing down a rather weaker side next time. "I mean, we're only a village team, after all," he had said, reasonably enough.

McCulper, flushed and slightly ill-tempered as half a bottle of Polignac got to work on his liver, had sensed that his triumph was complete: the villagers had given in, chickened out, couldn't take it. "Okay, if you feel like that," he'd said, jeeringly, "if you only want to play teams you're certain to beat we'll call the whole thing off. Fine with me. I don't give a damn either way. Right then – finished. No more President's XIs, though I must say I thought you'd have had the guts . . ."

"Bugger that," said Jake. "We've got guts all right. It's just that we're not good enough to play against sides made up of old Blues and county players and Test men and you know it, too. That's why you bring 'em all here, isn't it – just to make fools of us? Right, well sod you. Bring who you like, bring the England bloody Test Team. We'll show you, you miserable old bugger. We'll beat your lot next year, see if we don't."

And he had trudged away, head down, chin out, looking just as he did when opening the Martindale innings against some tearaway young fast bowler on a corrugated village pitch. McCulper had yelled after him: "You can't talk to me like that, Ponsonby!"

But Jake could and McCulper knew it because there were times when even Mrs McCulper had to avail herself of Jake's credit system.

When all this was reported to him and the rest of the team as they ate their ox sandwiches round the beer barrel Andrew, bearing in mind his relationship by marriage with the frustrated squire, had felt vaguely guilty and responsible. "Sorry, Jake," he had said, "but I'm afraid that's Maxie for you." He often referred to his father-in-law as Maxie, though never to his face nor even to his own wife's face for to Laura her father was omnipotent, omniscient and without blemish. Andrew had tried it on her once, when he first thought of it as a matter of fact. "I've

thought of a great name for your father," he had said, "Maxie McCulper, the notorious Scottish sinner."

"How dare you call him a sinner," Laura had said, sharply. "And anyway he's not Scottish." She was deeply prejudiced against Scots, regarding the entire race as so many Glasgow Rangers supporters, much given to getting drunk and thrusting broken bottles into other people's faces. "There hasn't been Scottish blood in our family for generations. Besides, why do you call him Maxie? His name's Arthur."

Andrew's little joke was equally lost on most of the cricket team. Henry Tyson appreciated it but the others let it go by unacknowledged and didn't even bother to work it out. Andrew didn't mind too much: it amused him and that was justification enough.

"Funny thing, isn't it," Jake had said after that angry encounter with McCulper, "your father-in-law never asks you to play in his President's XI. Doesn't think you're good enough, I suppose."

"No, it's not that," Andrew had said. "He just doesn't like me enough." And that was true.

Now, one year minus a week after the last debacle, the village was preparing once again to face the President's XI.

"Wonder who he'll invite this time," Henry said. "David Gower, I shouldn't wonder. Ian Botham, Michael Holding, Andy Roberts . . ."

"Oh, Christ," Andrew said.

Henry nodded. "Him, too, if He's available."

"No, I mean I've got to go to dinner up at The House." (McCulper's residence was always known as The House, probably because that was what he had called it. His address was The House, Martindale, as if no other house in the village was worth mentioning.) "I'd almost forgotten. God, look at the time."

"You're not playing tomorrow, are you?" Henry asked as Andrew collected his kit. The village played two matches every weekend and most of the team turned out twice. For a long time Laura hadn't allowed Andrew to play on Sundays but ever since she had developed an interest in archaeology earlier this year she had positively

encouraged it. Andrew had been delighted. He sometimes felt that it was only the fact that he was away for most of the weekend playing cricket that kept his marriage alive.

"No," he said. "I'm working. Have to see a movie."

"Call that working?" said Henry. He was an assistant editor of the *Daily Journal* and during a long career in Fleet Street had more than once served his turn as holiday relief film critic. He didn't regard going to the pictures as working.

"If you knew the film I had to see," said Andrew, "you'd call it working, too."

He trudged away in the warm evening sunshine across the cricket pitch towards the large mock-Elizabethan house, half-hidden at the end of an avenue of chestnut trees that had seen two or three dwellings come and go on the site. The cricket field was at the far end of McCulper's land with a road running alongside it and curving away into the heart of the village itself. It was a strong heart but a small one, consisting of Jake's shop, a pub, the village hall and the church. The residential area – which always seemed surprisingly large and affluent-looking until you remembered that in the next village, three miles away, there was a railway station with an excellent, fast service to London, ideal for commuters – clustered around the centre and then straggled away for a distance of about half a mile in each direction. There were farm cottages, council houses, small private estates of identical little boxes and a liberal scattering of bigger, more impressive homes. Andrew's house was to the west of the village, a modern building – four bed, two bath, three recep. and half an acre of garden. McCulper had given it to them, or rather to Laura for it was in her name. Indeed, it was only because Laura was living in Martindale that McCulper himself had moved there.

The front door of The House was open. Andrew went in, leaving his cricket bag by the door, and crossed the lofty parquet-floored hall to what McCulper referred to as "the Snug", a fairish-sized room with chintz-covered furniture and a number of tables bearing bottles and glasses.

McCulper was in there alone, drinking whisky. "Evening, Andrew," he said.

"Evening, Ma . . ., er, Arthur," said Andrew.

McCulper frowned. "I hope you weren't about to call me 'man' just then. I hate that American Negro talk."

"Sorry. Slip of the tongue."

"You might have dressed, you know," McCulper said. Andrew was wearing a navy blue blazer, grey slacks and an open-necked shirt. "Only polite to wear a tie for dinner."

"I've been playing cricket. Sorry. Didn't think about a tie."

McCulper handed him a whisky without bothering to enquire whether Andrew actually wanted a whisky. "Oh, yes? How'd you get on? Score any runs?"

"Yes, I did, as a matter of fact. I scored tw . . ."

"Twelve? That's not much to be proud of. Have to do better than that next week, my lad, though I don't suppose you will. Not much good at the game really, are you? Take any wickets today?"

"Well, yes, I took th . . ."

McCulper chuckled harshly. "You won't be doing a lot of bowling next week, I can tell you. I've got some fellows coming down who'll knock your stuff into the next county. Well, one way or another it seems you didn't have much of a game today. Still, that's par for the course, I suppose."

He went out onto the terrace overlooking a lawn and a well-kept rose garden. Andrew followed him, saying: "Where are Laura and the boys?"

"Still out with Oliver. They shouldn't be long."

"Oh."

This Oliver was the reason for Laura's recent interest in archaeology. He was, in fact, a professor of archaeology at Oxford or Cambridge or Durham or one of those places (Andrew had never been sure which), but much more importantly he was a television personality because of whose programmes the national interest in archaeology was greater than it had ever been since the days of Sir Mortimer Wheeler. For the last few months he had been

working whenever he could, mostly at weekends, on a Roman dig a few miles from Martindale and he had been introduced to Laura and Andrew by McCulper, through whose advertising agency Oliver had made a series of very lucrative and successful commercials. Andrew had never quite understood why they should have been successful, since he didn't really see why the endorsement of an archaeologist should encourage people to buy washing machines. He could only attribute it to the man's personal magnetism and that puzzled him even more because, as far as he was concerned, Oliver had no magnetism. Anyway, McCulper had invited Oliver to stay at The House whenever he was working on the dig and one Sunday had asked Laura and Andrew and their nine-year-old twins to meet him over lunch. The twins had taken to him immediately and he had taken to them. At once he had become "Uncle Oliver" and even before they had finished the sweet course the boys were pleading with their mother to take them to the dig the following Saturday.

"Why don't you take them?" Laura had said to Andrew. "Because you're playing cricket, I suppose?"

"Well, yes, I . . ."

And the twins had said: "No, Mum, you take us. We'd rather go with you." (They would always, Andrew had thought, rather go with their mother.) And so it had been arranged.

And by the time they returned the next Saturday evening all three of them had conceived such an enthusiasm for archaeology that they took to visiting the dig every weekend when the boys were home from boarding school. And when they were away Laura would go to the dig by herself, armed with little trowels and pans and various other bits of equipment. Her conversation now was nearly all about archaeology and the history of the Romans in Britain and was liberally spattered with remarks like, "Oliver says . . ." and "According to Oliver . . ." Andrew found this slightly irritating but on the whole preferable to her conversation in the pre-archaeology days, which had tended to run on the lines of, "How long are you going to keep wasting yourself in

that job?" and "Why don't you go back to Daddy's firm? You know he'd take you in if I asked him . . ."

"Hot day for grubbing about in ruins," McCulper said, returning to the Snug to replenish his glass.

"Yes," Andrew said, following him again.

Mrs McCulper came into the room; or rather Andrew was suddenly aware that she was in the room. For all he knew she could have been there all the time because she was the nearest thing to an invisible woman he had ever met. She was, he supposed, in her early fifties, a few years younger than her husband, tall, slim with greying blonde hair. Once she must have been something rather special to look at and even now when you examined her closely there was still the trace of a great beauty. But thirty years of marriage to McCulper had knocked the stuffing out of her as it would, Andrew thought, out of any woman much less steel-plated than Margaret Thatcher. In the right light and at the right angle her face with its wide mouth, long pale blue eyes and high cheekbones was occasionally breathtaking but there was a meekness about her, a downcast look, a tendency to glide unnoticed about the place and appear suddenly out of the shadows that hinted strongly at an absence of spirit. Her name was Alice but Andrew could only ever think of her as Mrs McCulper.

She smiled now at Andrew. It was a sad smile but he took no notice of that. Her smiles were always sad.

"What's for dinner?" said McCulper.

"Roast beef."

"Oh my God – roast beef! On a warm evening like this? We should have had a salad. Smoked salmon – something like that."

"But this morning you said you'd like roast beef . . ."

"That was this morning, before I knew it was going to be such a hot day."

"I'm sorry, Arthur."

"Oh well, never mind. It's too late now. But I should have thought you could have used a bit of initiative."

There was a clatter of feet on the parquet flooring and the twins rushed into the room, hot and dusty in shirts

and shorts. Andrew said, "Hi! How'd you get on?" and held his arms out to them but they rushed past him with no more than a glance and a polite smile to embrace their grandfather.

"Oh Grandad, we've had such a lovely time!" they said.

"Good, good." From above their heads, his arms around them, their arms around him, McCulper grinned triumphantly at Andrew. "They love their grandad," he said. "Don't you, boys? You love your grandad."

"Yes, we do, Grandad," they said. And so they did. From the moment they were born, McCulper had made sure of that. In those days Andrew had been working for him as an account executive and suddenly the accounts he was handling had begun to entail a great deal of travel and late hours, evening and weekend meetings in places like Manchester and Edinburgh.

He had protested about this, saying: "It's not that I mind the extra hours. But I've got Laura and the babies to think of . . ."

And McCulper had said: "Don't worry about Laura and the babies. I'll look after them." And he had. He had been a constant presence in Andrew's home and even when Andrew had finally persuaded Laura that a house in Notting Hill (rented from McCulper) was not the ideal place to bring up children and had suggested moving out into the country, it was McCulper who had found them the house in Martindale, whither he had followed them a year later.

"My boys," McCulper said as the twins babbled away about their adventures at the dig and indeed, Andrew thought, that's what they were – McCulper's boys. They even looked like him. True their hair wasn't as grey (at nine this was hardly to be expected) nor were their complexions as florid as his, for after all he had the advantage of forty years solid drinking over them. But their hair was wavy like his, their eyes were a sort of dark slate colour like his and already there was a suggestion of his burliness about them. And on top of that they seemed, like him, to have very little time for Andrew. Their interests were not

Andrew's interests. They disliked cricket or any form of athletics, never showed any curiosity about their father's job and never discussed with him their own pursuits which, apart from archaeology, included collecting birds' eggs and hunting butterflies. This lack of communication, Andrew had to concede, was probably his own fault. He had tried to put them off the birds' eggs and butterflies on the grounds that it was cruel but they had simply listened to his homily with polite, slate-grey eyes and taken no notice of him.

Now, as the twins showed their grandfather some of the things they had found at the dig, Laura arrived, tall and elegant, in a pale safari suit. Oliver came in behind her, carrying a leather bag that contained the tools of his archaeologist's trade.

Where most people might have had their initials on such a bag he had his full name – Oliver Lloyd – in discreet, though not too discreet, gold lettering.

Laura greeted her husband with a cool kiss on the cheek; Oliver, a half-head shorter than she, balding and plump, smiled and shook hands.

"Get the drinks, Andrew," said McCulper. Andrew poured gin and tonic for Laura, campari and lemonade for Oliver. Mrs McCulper had already, unnoticed, provided herself with a sherry.

Laura put a cigarette in her mouth. "Match," she said, snapping her fingers at Andrew.

"Pardon?"

"Match," she said, more sharply. "I said 'match'."

"Yes, I know you did. I just didn't hear you say please."

"Oh for God's sake." With exaggerated courtesy she added: "Match, *please*."

Andrew reached for one but he was too late. Oliver was already there with a lighter.

"Did you have a good day?" Andrew asked.

"Yes, fine. Wasn't it, Oliver?"

"Oh, excellent," Oliver said. "Most exciting. We've discovered an antechamber of whose existence we were totally ignorant before. I must get the cameras down when we start unearthing it next week." Oliver's dig was

to feature prominently in his next TV series. "I think we might even get Laura and the boys into a few shots. After all, they've deserved it. They've worked hard enough."

"Oh, thank you, Uncle Oliver," said the boys.

"Yes, thanks, Uncle Oliver," said Laura, smiling at him. "We'd all like that." She reached across and patted his hand and Oliver blushed, assuming the look of a balding little boy that had endeared him to countless middle-aged women throughout the land.

"Don't bring them down on Saturday," said McCulper. "We've got the cricket match on Saturday, remember."

"I hadn't forgotten," said Oliver.

"Oh yes, the cricket match," said Laura. "Poor Andrew."

"Why 'poor Andrew'?" said Andrew.

"Well, it's just going to be another embarrassing defeat for you and the village, isn't it?"

Before Andrew could answer, McCulper said: "It is if his showing today is anything to go by. He only scored twelve."

"I didn't," said Andrew, indignantly. "I scored . . ."

But nobody was listening. The woman from the village who came in to help with the cooking and the washing up whenever the McCulpers had guests was at the door announcing that dinner was ready.

"Let's go in then," said McCulper and led the way.

Andrew said to his sons: "Hey, fellers, you haven't even said hello. Come and talk to me. How are you?"

"Hello," they said. "We're fine, thanks," and they scampered away after their grandfather. Laura followed them with Oliver. Andrew looked around for Mrs McCulper in order to escort her but she seemed to have gone in already. At any rate she was no longer in the room, unless she was hiding in one of the corners. Andrew wouldn't have blamed her if she were.

He stood for a moment staring out into the garden as he finished his drink and then, with a sigh, went into the dining-room.

2

In his own way Andrew was quite famous; not as famous as Oliver Lloyd, of course, although their celebrity stemmed from the same source – television. Oliver's programmes were networked at a peak hour throughout the land and his books, always carrying on the dust jacket the prominent legend "Based on his major TV series", were automatic best-sellers both in hardback and paperback. Everybody knew Oliver Lloyd.

Andrew's programme, called *Capital Week*, was screened early on Friday evenings by National Metropolitan TV, the third, smallest and poorest of the London-based commercial television companies, and was seen only in London. It purported to be a "quirky, amusing, entertaining and informative round-up of the week's news in the world's greatest capital city". The publicity always put "informative" last in its blurb because informative was the last thing the programme was. In fact, it was ruthlessly frivolous and, in its conception, virtually pointless. This was a matter of company policy. Nat-Met only kept the programme going to comply with the terms of its franchise. But having promised the Independent Broadcasting Authority to provide a weekly round-up of London news and seeing no way to break this promise and get away with it, it was damned if it was going to expend a lot of time, energy and money on providing serious news. True, in its prospectus the company had promised "in-depth" coverage but "in-depth" was open to interpretation and, if challenged, Nat-Met could always insist with a great deal of truth that no other programme in the history

of television had ever covered trivia in such depth as *Capital Week*.

Andrew had now been the presenter of *Capital Week* for nearly two years and quite a lot of people in London knew him. They didn't, as a rule, know him very well but they did at least half-recognise him, usually as "that bloke off the telly – whatsisname?" Generally, when they pointed him out to each other thus they did so with the curious deference with which the British people treat anyone, however nondescript, who appears more or less regularly on TV. Andrew found that quite agreeable.

Indeed, he enjoyed his celebrity even though it was, insofar as such a contradiction in terms were possible, an anonymous celebrity, in that unlike Oliver he was hardly ever mentioned by the newspapers. The critics, in particular the critics with intellectual pretensions – and they nearly all had intellectual pretensions otherwise they would never have become critics – despised Oliver Lloyd. They despised him because he was successful and rich and famous, although they never admitted that this was why they despised him. The reason they claimed to despise him was because, they said, he "trivialised" archaeology, which is to say that he made the subject accessible and enjoyable for millions of people instead of doing what a scholar like himself should properly do and make it comprehensible only to other scholars. The critics wrote a lot about Oliver, most of it spiteful. They ignored Andrew.

On Sunday morning, however, in the dress circle bar of a cinema in Leicester Square Andrew was receiving the nods and smiles of recognition that were, after all, only his due in London. The film had been shown and had turned out to be quite as bad as Andrew expected. Indeed it had been even worse. And now he and a few dozen other privileged guests were being treated to drinks and sandwiches by the distribution company.

Andrew struggled through the throng, a much-needed glass of wine in his hand, to where *Capital Week*'s senior producer, Meg Kingsley, was standing with her assistant, Claudia.

"Well?" said Meg.

"Well what?"

"What did you think of the film?"

"Need you ask?"

Meg shook her head thoughtfully. "No. I suppose not."

This picture had been made by a twenty-two-year-old Londoner on a grant from the British Film Institute and a few thousand pounds that he had somehow conned from a merchant bank. It was about a group of teenagers in a lower-middle-class suburb who, for no clear reason, behaved appallingly on every possible occasion and it ended with the leader of the gang setting fire to his parents' home and walking off down a drab street into a dusty sunset to procure an abortion for his girl friend. The best that could be said for it was that it hadn't cost very much.

"I've just heard the man from *Time Out* describe it as a masterpiece," said Claudia. She was a tall, pretty young woman with long brown hair. Andrew was deeply in love with her.

"Well, he would, wouldn't he?" Andrew sipped moodily at his wine and looked at Claudia with longing eyes. The amused smile that he received in return hardly seemed a fair swap.

"Laura not with you?" asked Meg. She knew all about Andrew's passion for Claudia and therefore made a point of bringing Laura into the conversation whenever she could. Andrew had grown accustomed to this, though he still thought it was a little hard. After all, it wasn't as if he was actually *doing* anything with Claudia.

"No," he said. "She's taken the boys to a Roman dig with Oliver Lloyd."

"Oliver Lloyd?" said Claudia. "Oh, I like him. Don't you?"

"No," said Andrew, jealously. "What is there to like?"

"I just love his programmes. Nobody's ever made archaeology so fascinating since Mortimer Wheeler."

"You can't possibly remember Mortimer Wheeler," Andrew said. "You're far too young. Even I don't remember Mortimer Wheeler."

"No, but my mother does. She often talks about him. She says he was terribly handsome with a lovely moustache."

"Oliver Lloyd hasn't got a lovely moustache," Andrew said. "He hasn't got any kind of moustache. It's about the only good thing to be said for him."

"Envy," Meg said. "Pure envy. You're just jealous because he's rich and famous and women like him."

"Women like me, too," Andrew said and this was true, though he could never understand why. Admittedly, he was fairly tall and slim and quite good-looking but so were thousands of other men and women didn't necessarily like them. Sometimes he thought his mysterious appeal must lie simply in the fact that he liked women, a rare and very un-British characteristic in a man. He was fascinated by them – not just by their bodies and their smell and their skin and hair textures (though he liked those very much, too) but by their thought processes and their responses. Sterner followers of the feminist movement who believed that women should be admired only for their minds regarded him as a male chauvinist pig but he wasn't that at all. Indeed, he was a fervent opponent of sexual discrimination. All right, he was guilty of admiring their physical assets as well as their other attractions but in the end he was, quite simply, just a man who liked women. It was his opinion that when God had created Adam He contemplated His handiwork for a few days and then said to Himself, "God, old man, you really blew it that time," and so He went away and created Eve and this time He got it right.

"Andrew," said a voice at his elbow and he turned to find himself being accosted by another woman, the publicity girl for the film company.

"Hello, Victoria," he said, unenthusiastically. In normal circumstances his response would have been far warmer, for she was bright and very attractive but this time he wished she would go away because he knew what she was going to say next.

Nor did she disappoint him. "I'd like you to come and meet Julian," she said.

He stared at her blankly for a moment, wondering how he could get out of this.

"Julian Russell," she said, misunderstanding. "The director of the movie. *You* know." Indeed he did know. He had only been invited to see the movie that morning because Victoria and the rest of the film company were hoping he would invite this Julian Russell to appear on *Capital Week* next Friday to discuss his work. He could hardly avoid the meeting now.

He looked desperately at Meg and Claudia. "Are you coming?" he asked, needing their support or, if they refused that, at least their presence.

They shook their heads in unison. "I don't think so," said Meg. "Better if you talked to him alone. We'd only get in the way."

"Thanks a lot," he said, bitterly.

They smiled serenely at him. "Good luck," said Claudia.

Victoria led him away across the room to where Julian Russell waited, small, intense and arrogant and clad in faded blue jeans and a white T-shirt with a clenched, mailed fist emblazoned on the chest.

"When are we going to have that lunch?" Victoria asked as they pushed through the crowd.

"Soon," Andrew said. Whenever they met she invited him to lunch and he always put her off, not because he didn't want to have lunch with her but because he fancied her and he knew she fancied him and he was afraid of what might happen after a good meal and a bottle of wine. Andrew was essentially a faithful man. He might, certainly, be consumed most of the time by an all-embracing love for womankind but he was essentially faithful and he was not at all sure whether Victoria was. He didn't even know if she had anyone to be faithful to.

"I hear you want me on your programme," Russell said, lips curling in what he might have thought was a slight smile. It looked more like a sneer to Andrew.

"Well," Andrew said.

"Usual thing, I suppose – three minute in-depth interview." Dammit, however it was intended it most

certainly came out as a sneer. "Why does television have to be so grindingly superficial? And I expect," he added, with the resigned air of the artist who is aware that he and his works must inevitably be misunderstood, "you'll want me to explain what the film is really *about*? With due respect," he went on in a voice that showed no respect at all, "why do they have to get someone like *you* to interview me? Why not somebody like the guy from *Time Out*, somebody who obviously has an intellectual grasp of the picture?"

"Because it's my programme," Andrew said, curtly, "and if you don't like it . . ."

Russell raised his hands in a mocking gesture of appeasement. "No, no. I understand the rules of the game and I'm prepared to abide by them. Until they're changed," he said ominously, as if imminently expecting a counter-revolution that would put television firmly into the hands of people like himself and the man from *Time Out*. "What sort of thing do you want to discuss?"

"Well, a couple of thoughts come to mind. You remember that scene where the kids attack the old man . . ."

Russell nodded smiling.

". . . and they take his sticks away and he keeps falling over in the mud? And somebody steps on his glasses?"

Russell's smile turned into a deeply contented chuckle. "So you liked that scene, eh."

"Liked?" Andrew said, surprised. "Well . . ."

"I always planned that scene as the major comic set piece of the whole picture. I'm glad it worked."

"I see. Yes. Well, then the young policeman comes along and tries to stop them and they turn on him and strip him of all his clothes except his boots and his helmet and throw him into that stagnant pond . . ."

Russell laughed, reminiscently. "God, all that stuff *really* worked. I think that whole sequence is one of the funniest things I've ever seen on the screen."

Andrew, who had watched the sequence appalled, said: "What . . . what exactly were you trying to say

there? I mean, why did the gang behave like that?" From the corner of his eye he became aware of another girl standing beside Victoria, a small, dark-haired, elegant girl who was smiling at him with amused sympathy.

Russell gave a yelp of anger and frustration. "Dear God, does one have to spell everything out for you people? Christ knows, it could hardly be clearer. Listen, I'll try to put it simply for you: it was the rebellion of youth against the manacling conservatism of old age. Got that? And at the *same* time it was their protest against the baleful oppression of the uniformed Establishment. All that in a few moments of total comedy, a marvellous, hilarious reaction against the senile police state that this country has become and you're too . . . too brainwashed to see it. It makes one despair."

There was silence for a moment. The small, dark, elegant girl looked at Andrew and gave a baffled shrug. She was very pretty and, he noted gratefully, she was on his side.

He said: "There's one other thing . . ."

"Only one?" said Russell, not bothering to conceal the sneer now. "Well, that's something to be thankful for."

Andrew got a firm grip on his temper. "In that final scene, where the boy burns down his own home . . . were his parents in the house at the time?"

"I get it." Russell nodded slowly. "You were hoping they were out somewhere, weren't you? So they'd be saved? Typical bourgeois sentimentality. Of course they were in the house. There's no point otherwise."

"Oh, I don't know," Andrew said. "I thought it was a protest against capitalism, materialism, the decadence of ownership."

The sarcasm was lost on Russell who had suddenly become thoughtful, as if this idea hadn't occurred to him before. "Ah, yes, well, there was that, of course. I mean, certainly there was that. But essentially, it was a symbolic act, a breaking away from the crippling shackles of the family, a breaking away towards freedom. If you didn't

understand that you simply missed the whole point of the film. It was seminal, that scene. Not as seminal as the scene with the old man and the policeman perhaps but pretty seminal."

"You didn't make it clear that the parents were in the house," Andrew said.

"Well, I couldn't," Russell said, sounding querulous. "I wanted to show them burning, I wanted you to hear them screaming but the oppressive censorship in the film industry wouldn't let me. They said that if I made it obvious that the boy had burned his parents to death I'd also have to indicate that he would have to pay for this so-called crime. Crime! My God, it was the purest act in the whole film . . ."

The small, dark-haired girl said: "Mr Weston, I'm awfully sorry to interrupt but may I talk to you for a moment?"

"Oh, yes. Please," Andrew said. The girl began to lead him away.

"All right," Russell called after him. "I'll come on your programme and I'll try to explain the picture in words of one syllable – just so *you* can understand it."

Victoria said: "I'll call you in the week, Andrew, to make the arrangements."

Andrew said, "Fine, fine," and escaped gratefully towards the bar, towed by the dark-haired girl who, when they arrived there, said: "That young man is an arsehole."

"That's the word," said Andrew. On closer inspection he saw that she was not a girl at all but a woman of about thirty with brown eyes, regular features, small, white teeth and – something he found particularly irresistible in women – a generally amused air, as if she saw the world and all those in it as a constant source of quiet entertainment.

"That film of his," she said, when the barman had provided drinks, "is the most pretentious piece of utter shit I have ever seen."

"You liked it that much, did you?" Andrew said. "I wasn't quite so impressed by it as you were."

"My name's Claire," she said. And before he could respond . . . "I know who you are. That's why I rescued you."

"Thanks," he said, and meant it.

"You were pretty feeble in there, you know. Why did you listen so politely to all his bullshit? Why didn't you just kick him in the balls?"

Andrew considered the proposition. "Well, I thought about it but then I decided I didn't want to raise the level of discussion to that sort of intellectual plane. I wasn't sure he'd be able to keep up."

Meg and Claudia appeared beside them. "So sorry to interrupt, darling," said Meg purring. "But we're going now. Oh, and Victoria says you're desperately eager to have Julian Russell on the programme. I must say I'm a bit surprised. From what I saw of him I thought he was, well . . ."

"An arsehole," said Claire, firmly.

"Exactly." Meg bestowed an approving smile on the other woman. "Well, we'll talk about it tomorrow, Andrew. *So* sorry to butt in. I can see you're being awfully charming."

"He is awfully charming, isn't he?" said Claudia to Claire.

"Shut up!" said Andrew.

Claire stared at him gravely. "Yes, he is," she said.

Meg and Claudia drifted away as Victoria struggled through the crowd. "Bad news, Claire," she said. "I won't be able to give you a lift home after all. I've got to go to lunch with Julian Russell and some other people. A business thing."

"That's all right," said Claire, still looking at Andrew. "Andrew will take me home."

"Oh, will you?" said Victoria.

"What? Oh. Well. Yes . . . I suppose . . ." The thought of being alone with the elegant and humorous Claire was very disturbing.

"Oh, thanks," Victoria said. "Must dash. I'll call you, Claire. And I'll call you, too, Andrew. About lunch among other things." She disappeared again.

"Who was that tall, pretty girl?" Claire said. "The younger one?"

"Oh. That was Claudia. Producer's assistant. The other . . ."

"You want her, don't you?"

"What?"

"Oh, come on, don't pretend. It's perfectly obvious. You don't have to be bashful with me. I know exactly how you feel."

"What?" Andrew said again. "You mean you want her, too?" This sudden introduction of apparent lesbianism into the conversation had taken him aback.

"Of course not. I want you."

"Pardon?"

"You heard. Now come along, take me home. It's the very least you can do after I saved you from that frightful little shit."

And Andrew followed her, wondering what was the most he might be asked to do and whether it would be easier to decline than Victoria's lunch invitations. Maybe he ought to do something now – refuse to give her a lift perhaps, offer her money for a taxi instead. But she had her hand on his arm and was leading him towards the stairs as if he were a recalcitrant child. He followed her meekly, bewildered, alarmed and somehow dizzy with women.

3

Claire lived in a flat at St John's Wood and, as they approached it, they ran into a fair bit of traffic because there was a John Player League match at Lord's that afternoon and the crowd was already converging. Andrew watched them enviously. It was a perfect day for cricket, warm and sunny with the faintest of breezes. He had no particular liking for the limited overs game which he regarded as a travesty of the real thing, all seam-up and crash, bang, wallop; cricket with the subtlety excised from it, a game specially invented for the entertainment of people with a low attention span; the nearest equivalent to baseball without actually being baseball. Nevertheless, on a day like this even a Sunday League match was better than no cricket at all and had he been alone he would have taken his place beside the Tavern with a pint of bitter and one of those Scotch eggs that you can only find at Lord's, dull brown things like old cricket balls with the shine long since worn off them.

"You don't fancy watching some cricket, do you?" he asked, hopefully.

"No, I don't," said Claire. "Stupid game."

Andrew was not surprised by this response. The one great weakness of women, he had always found, was that generally speaking they didn't appreciate cricket. He often thought it was this curious flaw in their natures that had led to the expulsion of mankind from the Garden of Eden. If Eve, when offered the apple, had used it as any sensible person would to bowl a few off-breaks to Adam, then none of the other nonsense would have happened and Eden today would have resembled some

celestial Lord's where rain never stopped play and they had electronic scoreboards and everything.

"You like cricket, don't you?" asked Claire.

"It's my passion," Andrew said, simply. "How did you know?"

"Oh, I know quite a lot about you." He waited for her to explain how she had acquired this knowledge but she volunteered no more and he assumed she must have read about him somewhere. Not that there had ever been much to read, though the *Standard* had printed an interview with him a year or so ago. It hadn't been a particularly nice article and he couldn't remember now whether it had mentioned his enthusiasm for cricket. He supposed it must have done.

"Left here," she said, "and left again at the bottom."

They came to rest outside a smart, modern apartment block. "Come up for a drink," she said.

"Well . . ." He glanced surreptitiously at the dashboard clock. They'd just about be bowling the first over at Lord's, so if he dropped her off now and nipped back . . .

"Oh, come on," she said, impatiently. "I'm not going to hurt you."

"Well, a quick one then." A quick one would be all right. If he stayed an hour even it wouldn't be so bad. In an hour they'd have bowled fifteen or twenty overs, no more, and he could still see most of the game.

"A quick one was exactly what I had in mind," she said.

She had a two-roomed flat on the fifth floor, small but elegant like herself. It was a feminine apartment but confidently rather than aggressively so, the home of one who knew herself to be without question a member of the superior sex, and it suited what little Andrew knew of her. If her attitude to him was anything to go by she appeared to regard men with an amused affection as if she had decided long ago that one simply had to take them as one found them and it was no good expecting too much of them.

"Make yourself at home," she said, and disappeared

to potter about, he imagined, in the bathroom and the kitchen.

He switched on the television and tuned in to the cricket coverage on BBC2. They were showing the match at Lord's and even as Andrew turned on Mike Gatting was hitting a four. It was an appalling shot, a snick off the shoulder of the bat which, in any decent form of the game, would have had him very properly caught at first slip. Here, of course, there was no slip at all and the ball went to the boundary to the great delight of the beer-swillers in the crowd, who applauded loudly what they should have deplored.

Off the next ball Gatting hit another four. It pitched at least a foot outside the off stump but he pulled it lustily round through a gap between mid-wicket and square leg. Andrew shook his head sadly. It grieved him to see such a fine player prostituting his art in this travesty of cricket. The fact that he himself had played just such a shot the previous afternoon and accepted the applause it had received from his team-mates as no more than his due was neither here nor there. He was not Mike Gatting and Lord's was not a village green.

"Oh, charming," Claire said. "Am I boring you?"

Andrew switched the TV off guiltily. "No, no. Sorry I . . ."

"Here." She handed him a whisky. He hadn't asked for a whisky. He didn't even like whisky. He wondered why people kept giving him the stuff without even consulting him. Negative personality, that's what it must be. They didn't even think he was worth consulting. He really ought not to put up with it. What he ought to say was, "Look here, I didn't ask for this. I don't drink whisky . . ."

"Thanks," he said.

In the brief time she had been away she had changed from the navy blue suit she wore previously to a white silk kimono sort of thing. Andrew looked at her fearfully, wondering whether she was wearing anything else at all. She watched him looking at her. "Well?" she said.

"Oh, er, cheers," he said and gulped at the whisky. "Nice. The flat, I mean. Nice flat. Do you . . ."

". . . come here often?" she said. "It depends who I'm with." She looked at him steadily over the rim of her glass. Oh my God, Andrew thought, she's trying to seduce me. It was the kind of situation he had fantasised about often: alone in a flat with a desirable woman who wanted his body. But fantasising was one thing; reality was much more alarming. Why me, he thought desperately.

"Er . . . what exactly do you do?" he asked.

"What do you like?"

"No. No, I mean, what do you do for a living."

"I run a boutique in King's Road. I manage it. What do you want – references?" She emptied her glass and put it down. "Look, finish that drink and come with me."

"No, hang on. Listen, I'm . . ."

". . . a married man. Yes, I know. And I have a lover and these days that's much the same thing as being married, so we're quits. And your wife's not here and neither is my feller and as I told you earlier I want you, so come on."

"What . . . what do you want me for?" he asked, bewildered.

"Reasons," she said. She got up, pulled him from his chair and put her arms around him. "Don't keep asking boring questions," she murmured, chewing his ear lobe gently. In the circumstances he found it very difficult to keep a clear head. His emotions veered between lust and panic. In his fantasies he had coped with this kind of situation remarkably well, gracefully resisting temptation; he had been calm, debonair, had managed to extricate himself gently and unravished, leaving the woman unsatisfied but somehow grateful. Which was all very well in a fantasy where he controlled both the action and the conversation. In real life it was very different. He didn't appear to be in control of anything.

"I don't think . . ." he said.

"You don't have to think. Now, come along. It's the least you can do."

"You said that driving you home was the least I could do," he said.

"Driving me home was the beginning of the least you can do. This is the rest of it . . ." And by now they were in the bedroom and Andrew realised that what he had always feared about himself was true – he was mere putty in the hands of a determined woman. Well, metaphorically anyway. Why me, he thought, why me? But it hardly seemed the time or the place to ask her that again . . .

Some time later (when the Middlesex innings would be about half over, unlike Andrew's, which was now complete) he said, thinking back to how this had all begun: "I thought you said it was only going to be a quick one."

"Well, it was a quick one. It was very quick really."

"Oh. Sorry." He had never regarded himself as much of a swordsman but it was disconcerting to have it confirmed quite so bluntly.

"I'm not complaining," she said, patting him affectionately but briskly on the cheek. She leaned over to look at the bedside clock. "Perhaps you'd better go now or your wife will wonder where you've been."

"That's nice," he said, bitterly. "You've had your will of me and now you throw me aside like an old sock." There had been no foreplay to speak of and it seemed there was to be no afterplay either, no languorous murmuring and comparing of notes. It had, in fact, been an exceedingly clinical business altogether, not at all like a fantasy. Hitherto Andrew had – give or take a certain incident or two – belonged to the President Jimmy Carter school of adulterers in that he only committed the act in his heart; if this was what it was like in a bed, he thought, then infidelity was a much-overrated business and not a patch on adultery in the heart.

"Well," she said, "we don't want you getting into trouble, do we?"

They dressed quickly and impersonally, not even

looking at each other. In truth Andrew was quite glad to go. It had been, he thought as he stuck his head under the sheet in search of his underpants, a remarkable experience but he could not honestly claim to have enjoyed it all that much. It hadn't really been what *he* wanted, that was the thing: it had been what *she* wanted. Had decisions been left to him it would never have happened at all: he would simply have drunk his whisky, said goodbye and gone home, very possibly fantasising on the way about what might have been. What had actually been was, in retrospect, rather baffling. Why me, he asked himself again.

"What was all that about?" he said, putting his jacket on.

She looked at him gravely from the other side of the bed. "That was what is known as sex, Andrew. It's what tends to happen when a man and a woman get into bed together without their clothes on and . . ."

"Oh, very good. Yes. Very funny. What I mean is, what was the point of it?"

"Oh dear. Didn't the earth move for you, Andrew? I must be losing my touch."

He said, exasperated: "When you've quite finished with the comedy routine, will you please tell me why? Why did . . ."

She slipped her arm into his and walked him to the door. "Never you mind." She let him out into the corridor, smoothed his hair and kissed him lightly on the tip of the nose.

"Shall I . . . shall I call you?" he asked, unused to this kind of thing.

"If you like." She kissed him again, on the lips this time. "Bye. Thanks for the lift. Oh, and thanks for the quick one, too." And chuckling she shut the door behind him.

There was a man in the corridor, a short, bald, stocky, middle-aged man with an artificial leg. He was reading the numbers on the doors of the flats and moving his lips as he did so.

"Afternoon," Andrew said, buttoning his shirt. He

was aware that the man must have seen him and Claire kissing in her doorway and the realisation made him feel awkward. "Can I help you?"

"Arr. Which be Mr Herschel's flat, zurr?" the man asked in a ludicrous West Country accent. Andrew had the uneasy suspicion that he was being sent up. To make matters worse he realised that his offer of help was absurd because he had never before been in this building.

"I've no idea," he said.

"Arr," said the man and carried on reading numbers. Fortunately the lift arrived then and Andrew fled into it. When it reached the ground floor he could hear the other man hurrying down the stairs, one soft step followed by a thump as the metal, artificial leg hit the polished uncarpeted woodwork.

Andrew's car had already pulled away by the time the bald man emerged from the apartment block and limped swiftly to a telephone box on the next corner.

"Spade here," he said, when his call was answered, speaking now without a trace of West Country accent but in a fashionable suburban whine. "Ray Spade." It wasn't really necessary to identify himself quite so closely for he had called the same number only an hour previously but he was a careful man. "The party in question has just left the flat of the other party in question. Kissing, they were . . . What? . . . Yes, yes, of course I shall continue surveillance. Of the party of the first part, do you mean, or the party of the second part?" There was an irritated squawk at the other end of the line. "Well, as I see it, the party of the first part is, in this context, the one with the car while the party of the . . . Oh. Yes. Right. Certainly. Sir," he added. He replaced the receiver. His reflection squinted back at him from the mirror and he practised changing his expression – indeed, he thought, his entire appearance – in subtle ways: the raising of an eyebrow, the curling of the lips, the puffing of the cheeks. A master of disguises. Just like it said on his business cards.

Then, making sure that nobody was observing him – and nobody was because there was no reason why

anybody should – he left the phone booth and hurried briskly towards his own car parked a few yards down the road. His artificial foot thumped the pavement noisily as he walked.

The game on the Martindale ground was in its second, post-tea, phase by the time Andrew arrived back from London. The opposition had scored 163 for nine declared and now the home team was moving along nicely at 80 for four. A group of the Martindale players, their wives, girl friends and families, were clustered in deck chairs outside the pavilion enjoying the evening sunshine.

Andrew dropped into a chair beside Henry Tyson. "How does it look?" he asked.

"Forty minutes and twenty overs to go," Henry said. "We should do it okay, so long as Roger gets a move on."

"How did you get on?"

"Three wickets and a catch. Hell of a catch, too. I was at short square leg and this left-hander pulled one from Jake like a rocket and . . ."

"Get any runs?" Andrew said. He never listened to people's accounts of the catches they had held: they were about as reliable as fisherman's tales or Russian history books.

"Only eight," Henry said. "Bloody Elvis ran me out."

"Oh." Elvis was always running people out. Always his own team-mates, never the opposition.

"Oh, come on, Roger!" Henry yelled, irritably. The batsman thus addressed had just taken a mighty heave at the ball and missed, as was his habit. He was sometimes known to his team-mates as "the Cumbrian Flasher", this being a reference firstly to his place of birth and secondly to his custom of flailing wildly and inaccurately outside the off stump. It was generally felt that in any innings he played he was in less danger of being dismissed than of being arrested for indecent exposure of his bat.

"You'd think he might make contact occasionally," Henry said. "He's been out there more than half an hour

now and I don't think he's hit the ball in the middle of the bat once."

"That's his method," said Andrew, tolerantly. "Playing and missing. It's what he's good at."

Behind them Roger's wife nudged her friend in the ribs. "He's just the same in bed," she said. "Playing and missing . . ." The pair of them collapsed into squawks of mirth. Andrew and Henry ignored the female frivolity.

"You know his problem?" Andrew said. "His guard's all wrong. He never knows where his middle stump is."

"Just the same in bed!" said Roger's wife's friend and they both rolled about helplessly in their deck chairs.

Out in the middle Roger, happily ignorant of all this ribaldry, carried on with his natural game, playing and missing with great confidence outside the off stump and occasionally, as if to show his versatility, outside the leg stump too. From time to time, however, he succeeded in finding if not the middle of the bat, then at least the middle of the edge and the ball would fly off at unexpected angles – over the wicket-keeper's head perhaps or precisely between the two slips – and then a run or two would come his way. Most of the time, though, he just played and missed, although always with great determination and vigour, the bat swishing with a violence to make the very air wince.

"I wish he'd get out," Henry said. "We'll never win this bloody game while he's there."

Just then, as if he himself had also come to exactly that conclusion, Jake Ponsonby gave Roger out. For this match, a village friendly, neither side had provided an umpire and so the players themselves took it in turns to wear the white coats. Now with Jake officiating at the bowler's end Roger took a great heave at the ball, as usual, and missed, as usual, by about a foot. But as it passed between his bat and his body the ball brushed Roger lightly on the hip. The wicket-keeper, a youth of about fifteen, appealed automatically, albeit half-heartedly, for a catch and Jake's right index finger shot triumphantly into the air in a gesture of dismissal.

"Well done, Jake," muttered Roger's batting partner

but these congratulations were not at all echoed by Roger himself or, indeed, by the fielding team.

"That was never out," yelled Roger. "I never touched the bloody thing." He turned in appeal to the opposing captain. "I never touched the bloody thing, did I? I never touched the bloody thing."

"No," said the opposing captain, who was quite as aware as Henry or Jake that while Roger was at the wicket defeat for the visitors was inconceivable. "He never touched the bloody thing, Jake."

"Umpire's decision is final," said Jake, staring thoughtfully at the sky.

"Well done, Jake," said Roger's batting partner again.

Roger hesitated, gazing around for support from the fielders, but in the face of this implacable umpire they were powerless to assist him, much as they wanted him to stay.

"Look here," Roger said.

"Don't argue with the umpire," Jake said, sternly. "On your bike, Rog."

The batsman shuffled disconsolately away from the wicket and the opposing captain strode up to the wicket-keeper, his nephew, and cuffed him sharply round the ear. "You silly young sod," he said. "Fancy appealing like that. You've probably lost us the bloody game now."

In so saying he proved to be a shrewd judge of the situation, for with Roger out of the way the next three Martindale batsmen scored the seventy or so runs needed for victory without too much difficulty.

Henry and Andrew applauded the fielding side in and then tarried to greet Jake as he brought up the rear, a set of stumps under his arm.

"Roger reckons he never touched that ball," Henry said.

"Nor did he," said Jake. "Wasn't within a mile of it."

"Well done, Jake," Andrew said.

Jake shrugged modestly. "Team game, cricket. Individuals have to suffer sometimes."

"You're a rotten old bugger, Jake," said the opposing skipper.

"True," said Jake. "But you'd have done the same, Alf. In my place."

"That I would," said the opposing skipper. "Come and have a pint." They went away together into the pavilion, from the back of which Elvis now emerged, dragging a set of chains to put up around the cricket square. "Sorry I ran you out, Henry," he said.

"Piss off, Elvis," said Henry.

"Right-ho, Henry," said Elvis and dragged his chains towards the square.

It occurred to Andrew that it was about time he went home and he was on the point of doing so when he heard his name called in an authoritative bark from the direction of the pavilion. McCulper was standing there, holding a large whisky and soda and wearing an angry expression and a Sunday afternoon drinker's flush. "Where the hell have you been?" he said, snarling.

Andrew, remembering for the first time in an hour precisely where he had been that afternoon, felt a twinge of guilt. "What?"

"You were supposed to take the twins back to school," McCulper said. "Remember the twins, do you? Your sons, you know. You were supposed to take them back to school this afternoon."

"Oh, God!" Andrew looked at his watch. He'd forgotten all about the twins.

"Too late now," McCulper said. "Laura's taken them. She and Oliver. They went off about four o'clock. Bloody fine father you are."

"I was . . . I was working," Andrew said.

"No, you weren't. You were seeing a film. Eleven o'clock it started and look at the time now – quarter past seven. Making films eight hours long these days, are they?"

"Well, I . . . I had things to discuss afterwards. Things to do with the programme . . ."

"Rubbish. Programme like yours doesn't need any discussion. Dear God, if anyone stopped to discuss it . . . if they even stopped to *think* about it for a minute or two they wouldn't bother to do it any more. No, you've been

lazing around here, haven't you, watching the cricket and daydreaming?"

McCulper finished his drink and went back into the pavilion in search of a refill. Henry came out of the changing-room at the side, carrying his cricket bag. "Been having a friendly chat with your father-in-law?" he asked.

Andrew stared out at the cricket square where about half the Martindale team were sweeping the pitch, putting up the chains and bringing in the sightscreens. "He always makes me feel about ten years old."

"That's because you used to work for him. *And* you married his daughter – fatal combination." Henry gave him a consoling pat on the shoulder. "Come on, give us a lift home and if you play your cards right I expect Sue will invite you for supper."

Henry lived in the second biggest house in Martindale, an attractive Victorian building with a few acres of lawn, vegetable garden and paddock. It had cost far more than he could have afforded on his salary from the *Daily Journal* but fortunately his wife, Sue, was the author of a series of children's books which sold handsomely in Britain and the U.S.A. and in fourteen foreign languages. Henry himself had once written a novel which had been praised extravagantly in the *Daily Journal*, though in no other publication, and hadn't sold handsomely anywhere. There were times when he thought that he owned the only twelve copies in existence. A few years previously he had been rather jealous of his wife's success but now he had come to accept it and to be proud of it, being only sorry that she wrote under her maiden name – Susan Copper – rather than her married name. He didn't even mind any more when her agent referred to him as "Mr Copper".

"How are the twins by the way?" Henry asked, as they drove through the village towards his house.

"Okay. Much the same as usual. And Timmy?"

"Oh, he's fine. Matter of fact he's just got into the Junior Colts team at school. Not a bad fast bowler actually. Funny how kids turn out, isn't it? When he was very

young I thought he was going to be a poof. Hung around with Teddy Bears till he was about four."

Sue greeted her unexpected guest with a warm kiss on the cheek and a lavish helping of salad, both of which he found equally welcome. He had eaten nothing except a couple of sausage rolls all day and, having spent a fairly energetic afternoon, was extremely hungry.

For a while after the meal they sat in Henry's study, a room furnished mainly with books and battered, comfortable leather armchairs and Andrew told them of the ghastly film he had seen and its even more ghastly director and Sue enquired politely after the twins and Laura. She didn't really like Laura. Not many women did, Andrew had discovered.

"Well, give her my love," Sue said, not meaning it. She stood up, a tall, rather beautiful woman in her late thirties, a few years younger than Henry. "Do you mind if I go back to work? There's a chapter I've got to get finished."

Henry stood up, too, not out of courtesy, more because he wanted another bottle of wine. And when he had opened it and poured glasses for himself and Andrew, and Sue had gone, and they had sipped for a while in companionable silence, Andrew said, thinking about his escapade of the afternoon and wanting to confide in someone: "What do you think about infidelity?"

"Depends whose it is," Henry said. "If it were mine I reckon I could face it with some equanimity. If it were Sue's I don't suppose I'd be best pleased."

"Ah," Andrew said.

"I imagine we're talking about yours," Henry said.

Andrew nodded.

"I see. When did this happen?"

"This afternoon."

"Really? Well, I daresay it was more fun than fielding at mid-off. Who was the lady?"

"Someone I met this morning."

"Blimey, you don't hang about, do you?"

Andrew shook his head. "No, it wasn't like that. It was all very odd, really. I mean, it was her idea, not mine."

"Ah. Raped, were you? Have you informed the police?"

Andrew said: "Oh, shut up. Honestly, it was really bizarre. It all sort of happened almost before I realised it. And it was . . . very impersonal."

"That's the modern way," Henry said, speaking with the wisdom of one who worked for the popular Press and who was, in any case, some ten years older than Andrew. "A muttered 'Hello' and, instead of a 'How d'you do?' a soft little hand creeping into your fly and Bob's your uncle. Romance is quite dead, you know. What was her name?"

"Claire."

"Claire what?"

"I've no idea."

Henry refilled their glasses. "Oh well, I suppose it's something that you conversed enough to exchange Christian names."

"We didn't even do that. She already knew mine."

"Does this sort of thing happen to you often, young Andrew?"

"No. Well . . . I get offers. Everyone who's on TV a lot gets offers. But, I don't know, this was different. She was really rather bright. Very attractive and smart. Quite chic, actually. I . . . I just can't imagine why she did it."

"Your overwhelming sex appeal, I expect."

"No, I don't think so."

"What I can't understand," Henry said, "what is not at all clear from the general drift of your conversation is whether you're boasting or complaining. If the former I wish you'd stop; if the latter I really don't see why. That kind of thing never happens to me, more's the pity."

"You wouldn't even want it to," Andrew said.

"True. Did you?"

"No. I wish it hadn't happened now." He stared out of the window at the darkening garden. "I would have gone to Lord's if it hadn't been for her."

"Egad!" said Henry, sitting up. "What kind of Jezebel is this person? To come between a man and his wife is one thing but to come between a man and a John Player League match . . ."

Sadly Andrew said: "I was hoping to get some sympathy."

"Well, too bloody bad, mate. Things are tough all over. You may not have enjoyed your innings this afternoon very much either but at least you weren't bloody run out, were you?"

It was nearly midnight and Andrew had been home an hour before Laura and Oliver Lloyd turned up. They were hardly in the house before Laura said: "Well, at least you might say thank you."

"Who to?"

"Oliver, of course. He was kind enough to drive sixty miles to take *your* sons back to school."

"Oh. Yes. Sorry. Thank you, Oliver. Look, I'd just completely forgotten . . ."

"Typical," Laura said. "You might make some tea, Andrew. Oliver would like some tea, wouldn't you? Oliver would like some tea."

"Okay." He moved towards the kitchen. "You were a long time getting back."

"Yes, well, Oliver was kind enough to give me dinner. Just as well, isn't it? Otherwise I'd have to start cooking something for myself – at this hour of night."

"If you hadn't stopped for dinner it wouldn't be this hour of night," Andrew said, reasonably.

Oliver chuckled. "Good point, Andrew. Well put."

"Don't encourage him," Laura said. "My God, you'd think a man would take enough interest in his own sons to . . ."

"Look," Andrew said. "I'm sorry. Okay? I apologise. I'm totally at fault. I accept that. And I'm very grateful to Oliver. Now, do you really want tea, Oliver, or do you want a drink?"

"Oliver would like some tea," said Laura.

"I'd like a drink, please," said Oliver.

"See?" said Andrew to Laura. She subjected him to an icy stare; she was very good at icy stares. Andrew gave her an enigmatic smile in return. Enigmatic smiles, he

was forced to acknowledge, had nothing like the power of icy stares but they were better than nothing. He went away to get the drinks.

"One other thing," Laura called after him. "Oliver's staying the night." There was in her voice the triumphant ring of one who felt she was having the last word.

In the dining-room Andrew gave another enigmatic smile and started mixing a whisky and soda for Oliver. He had no idea whether Oliver wanted a whisky and soda but that was what he was getting. He didn't even know whether Oliver liked whisky and soda but he rather hoped not.

4

On Monday morning Andrew arrived at the Nat-Met building in Notting Hill Gate just before half-past ten. He had had quite a busy morning already because Laura had overslept and he had been obliged to cook breakfast for himself and Oliver Lloyd. He had not objected too much to the cooking, scrambled eggs on toast being a simple enough dish to prepare, but Oliver had been a glum mealtime companion, complaining of a headache and an upset stomach and doing nothing much with his food except rearrange it on his plate. It was last night's whisky, he said, that had upset him; whisky always did that to him and he seemed to hold Andrew responsible.

"God knows why you kept giving me the stuff," he said. "I never drink whisky."

Andrew smiled behind his *Guardian*. "Well, you should have said."

"I didn't like to. Not when you'd already poured it out without asking."

"You didn't have to keep drinking it."

"You didn't have to keep filling my glass."

"Only trying to be a good host," Andrew said. On the whole, he thought as he set off for town yelling a cheery goodbye through the lavatory door to Oliver, it hadn't been too bad a breakfast time really. The best bit had been when he had told Oliver firmly that what he really needed was a little food inside him and had made him swallow three mouthfuls of egg. He couldn't be entirely sure but there was a fair possibility that Oliver had actually been sick after that. Certainly he had left the table in a hurry and had not returned to it and his reply to Andrew's farewell had sounded pleasingly like a groan of despair.

The *Capital Week* production offices on the third floor were all empty except for the tiny cubicle occupied by the studio manager, Leonard Wishman, who was busy writing a love letter to the Princess of Wales. He didn't actually announce that this was what he was doing but it was widely known in the office that he spent nearly all his spare time writing love letters to the Princess of Wales. There were pictures of her, cut from newspapers and magazines, all over the walls of his cubicle and directly in front of his desk was the framed acknowledgment from her secretary of the very first letter he had ever written to her.

"Writing to the Princess again?" Andrew asked.

Leonard put his left arm protectively around the paper on which he was writing, a sheet of pale blue Basildon Bond. "What if I am?" he said.

Andrew perched on the edge of the desk. "You're pretty weird, Leonard – you know that, don't you?"

"Fuck off," said Leonard.

"I hope you don't use language like that in your letters. The Princess is a very well brought-up young woman. You're not going to attract her attention by writing words like 'fuck' to her."

"Leave me alone," Leonard said. "You've ruined the whole mood now." He was a pale, bespectacled young man with thinning blonde hair and he lived by himself in a maisonette in Crouch End. Andrew may have been a little harsh in describing him as weird but he was certainly different from the average run of Nat-Met employees. He rarely spoke except when spoken to, brought sandwiches for his lunch, was never seen at the bar and nobody knew anything at all about his private life beyond the fact that he wrote frequent letters to the Princess of Wales and was saving all the money he could, though to what end was a mystery.

"Where are the others?" Andrew asked.

"What others?"

Andrew sighed. "The people who work here," he said, patiently. "The production team. There's not just you and me, you know. I mean, there's Meg and there's Claudia and there's . . ."

"I don't know where they are," Leonard said. "Go away."

Andrew went downstairs to the canteen. It was fairly quiet at this time of the morning, just before the eleven o'clock rush. He got himself a cup of coffee and took it to a table by the window where Maurice Bowles was sitting alone doing *The Times'* crossword puzzle.

"See the programme on Friday?" Maurice asked.

"Er . . . well, I caught a bit of it." Maurice was the editor and presenter of *Culture*, an arts programme that went out at eleven forty-five on Friday nights and attracted an audience so small that there was no known way of measuring it. The show usually consisted of a studio discussion between Maurice and two or three experts on whatever topic he had chosen that week, although in fact Maurice took very little part in the proceedings. He merely announced the subject under consideration, threw out a question that would be quite meaningless to anyone who was not already an expert and left his assembled experts to it. As an introduction to the arts, *Culture* was about as much use to the average television viewer as a science lesson for beginners that started with the assumption that they had already grasped the theory of relativity. "I only came in halfway through, but it seemed to be about the importance of the hanging participle in post-structuralism."

"Something like that," Maurice said gloomily. "God, it was boring." He had no real interest in the arts whatsoever; what he really wanted was to be a sports reporter. Unfortunately, *Culture* was Nat-Met's critical flagship. The reviewers, especially those of the so-called quality Press, praised it lavishly and the more arcane, the more abstruse it became, the more they professed to admire it, with the result that *Culture* was Nat-Met's most important loss-leader, the one truly intellectual programme that they could flourish before the Independent Broadcasting Authority whenever franchise time came round again.

"To be honest with you," Andrew said, "I can't understand half the people on your programme."

"I can't understand any of the buggers," Maurice said.

His method of running the programme was to consult one of the experts on that week's subject and ask him to provide six controversial topics for discussion. He would then toss these in from time to time and sit back, nodding wisely. Most weeks *Culture* ended with the attendant experts shouting at each other in heated, complicated argument and Maurice turning to camera and saying: "Well, much food for thought there. But, alas, that's all we have time for tonight. Next week, on a rather lighter note, we'll be discussing the post-Brechtian influences at work in Agatha Christie's *The Mousetrap*. So until then . . ." Maurice was extremely impressive in his understated role of Mr Interlocutor, largely because his programme plunged him so deeply into depression that he lent it an overwhelming *gravitas*.

"Smashing game at the Oval on Saturday," Maurice said. "David Gower's hundred was sheer delight. You weren't there, I suppose?"

"No, I was playing."

"Ah." Maurice played cricket, too, occasionally, for the old boys' eleven of his former school. He also, in their respective seasons, played soccer and squash and tennis but whatever the sport his enthusiam was matched and indeed surpassed by his lack of natural ability.

The canteen began to fill up now as production staffs and technicians drifted in for their elevenses. Meg and Claudia appeared, both wearing the unofficial television uniform of jeans, sweatshirts and leather bomber jackets. They brought their coffee and cheese rolls and doughnuts to where Andrew and Maurice were sitting. It always amazed Andrew that women could eat so much and still remain slender.

"Where've you been?" he asked.

"Production meeting," Meg said, biting deeply into a roll. "In Charles's office." This Charles, Charles Kaufman, was an important man around Nat-Met, combining the roles of deputy managing director, Head of Production and Programme Controller.

"He didn't invite me," Andrew said.

"Didn't invite me either," said Maurice. "But then he

never does. There's nobody around here qualified to discuss my programme. Including me."

"How'd it go?" Andrew said.

Meg shrugged. "So-so. Mark Payne's coming back."

"Oh, shit!"

Until a year or so ago Mark Payne had been Nat-Met's one authentic star, a chat show host and presenter of numerous documentaries who was genuinely famous. Mike Yarwood did impersonations of him and journalists compiling dial-a-quote articles rang him up soliciting his comments on anything from nuclear weapons to pre-menstrual tension.

But along with being genuinely famous he was also genuinely unpopular, not with the audiences who accepted the ersatz sincerity which was his hallmark as the real article, but with the people who had to work with him. So when his last documentary for Nat-Met, an investigation into the life of an ancient movie star in Hollywood, had turned out to be a disaster and he had resigned from the company after an acrimonious quarrel with Charles Kaufman, there had been general rejoicing. He had, however, landed on his feet with a weekly chat show for one of the bigger commercial TV companies and now, apparently, he had been wooed back to Nat-Met.

"What's he going to do?" Andrew asked.

"I suppose he wouldn't be interested in presenting *Culture*?" Maurice said, hopefully.

"He wouldn't even know how to spell it," Claudia said. She was looking particularly lovely today, Andrew noticed, with her hair piled up and her long, slender neck exquisitely emphasised by the collarless sweatshirt.

"He'll be doing something called *Yours Sincerely*," Meg said. "But it hasn't been decided when. I imagine," she added, glumly, "there's going to be a lot of reshuffling around here." She looked up at Andrew. "I think we'd better have a talk," she added.

Before Andrew could respond Charles Kaufman loomed up beside them with Mark Payne in tow. "Don't get up," Kaufman said, though nobody showed any

signs of doing so. "You all know Mark, I think. He's coming back to us. Good news, eh?" From the seated company there was a chorus of muted murmurs that could have denoted anything. Kaufman and Payne chose to interpret them as murmurs of delight. "Get us some coffee, Claudia," Kaufman said, picking instinctively on the most junior member of staff present. He and Mark pulled up chairs from an adjoining table and sat down.

Claudia rose obediently and walked away to the self-service counter, Andrew gazing wistfully after her. He wished women like her wouldn't move their hips in that provocative manner when they walked. He knew they couldn't help it – it was simply to do with the way their legs were fastened on – but he found it deeply disturbing.

"Nice-looking girl, that Claudia," Kaufman said. He spoke as if this was a fact that had only just come to his attention, as well it might have. He didn't, as a rule, mix with production assistants. "Very nice indeed." His gaze as he followed the departing back view was as appreciative as Andrew's but, Andrew thought with a twinge of possessive jealousy, not as pure, not as genuinely loving; much more lecherous.

Kaufman said: "Has Meg spoken to you yet?"

"Well, no. She . . ."

"She will." There was something rather ominous about the way he said that.

Mark Payne reached across and helped himself unbidden to the doughnut which the coffee-getting Claudia had left on her plate and bit into it. As he chewed he inhaled sharply through his nostrils and turned down the corners of his mouth in an expression of sincerity. It must have taken a lot of practice, Andrew thought, to be able to manage all those things at the same time. "Good to be back," Payne mumbled through the doughnut.

"Looking forward to the big match on Saturday?" Kaufman asked Andrew. "Not that your lot stand any sort of chance again. Arthur tells me you only scored twelve on Saturday."

"I did not score twelve," Andrew said, indignantly. "I scored . . ."

"Twelve, eh?" said Maurice. "Not much of a knock that. I always had the idea you were a useful bat, Andrew."

"Look, I scored tw . . ."

"Well, Caroline and I will be there on Saturday," Kaufman said. "Wouldn't miss it for the world. Always good for a laugh, that game. I mean, the way your lot were turned over by that Indian waiter last year was hilarious . . ."

"He was not a waiter," Andrew said. "He was . . ."

"I expect you'll be there, too, Meg, will you?" Kaufman asked.

She nodded enthusiastically. "Oh yes. It's a lovely day out."

Last year Arthur McCulper had added a subtle refinement to the sadistic pleasure he derived from the annual President's XI match: he had invited his old friend and business associate Charles Kaufman and the entire *Capital Week* production team to watch the debacle. In that way he had not only enjoyed the satisfaction of humiliating the village in general but, even more pleasurably, had assembled an interested audience to watch the particular humiliation of Andrew, who had been hit for eighteen runs in two overs and had then been bowled middle stump for a duck, offering no stroke to the Indian diplomat's googly.

"Why don't you come, Mark?" Kaufman said. "And you, Maurice. I usually take a party down. Old Arthur doesn't mind and if the weather's fine it's a splendid day out. Ox-roast and a piss-up afterwards – rural England at its best. Of course, you won't want to blink when Andrew goes into bat or you'll miss his entire innings . . ."

A female voice over the intercom said: "Telephone call for Andrew Weston. Andrew Weston to the phone, please."

Andrew escaped gratefully, leaving Kaufman distributing words of praise to Maurice. "Great programme on Friday, Maurice. Riveting stuff. *Culture* at its best. Did you see it, Mark?"

"Well, I . . ."

"Like a word with you later in the week, Maurice," Kaufman said. "I've got some news for you . . ."

Andrew heard no more. He went out of the canteen and picked up a telephone in the hall and after he had identified himself and his call had been put through, a husky feminine voice said: "Hello, darling."

"Who's that?" he asked, startled. "Is that you, Claire?" He couldn't, for the moment, imagine who else would be addressing him so intimately. He wished Claire wouldn't do it either; on reflection he had decided that he would rather not see her again. She was desirable, certainly, and her attentions had been extremely flattering but on the whole yesterday afternoon's experience had merely underlined his conviction that adultery was not really his game.

The husky voice said icily: "Claire? Who the hell's Claire? This is Caroline."

"Oh, Christ!" he said.

"Charming. Now that is really charming. I haven't seen you in simply ages, lover, and all you can say is 'Oh, Christ!'"

Andrew said desperately: "What are you calling me for? I've just been having coffee with your husband."

She chuckled. "Ah, how is old Charles? He was in a rotten mood this morning, I can tell you. Did you know that shit Mark Payne's coming back?"

"Yes. What do you want?"

"I want you, darling." Andrew could hardly believe this: two different women on successive days, both wanting him as a matter of, it seemed, extreme urgency? What on earth was going on? Was he suddenly, inadvertently, putting out some kind of musk that caused women to flop helplessly on their backs at the very thought of him? No, clearly not. Claudia showed no signs of flopping; neither did Laura.

He said: "I can't."

"Yes, you can," she said. "I'll expect you at four o'clock. And you'd better be here, lover."

The phone went dead. Andrew stood there for a moment, fighting down panic. Then he glanced into the

canteen. Kaufman, Caroline's husband, was still at the table, holding court. In the circumstances Andrew could not face the prospect of rejoining them all. Worried and bewildered he went back upstairs to his office.

Fifteen minutes later Meg came in. Andrew's was a small office, not a great deal bigger than a broom cupboard really, but then they all were on this floor, except for the production office which Meg shared with Claudia, two researchers, a secretary and the junior producer. All the smaller rooms were painted beige and each was equipped with a dull brown carpet, a desk, a telephone, a typewriter, two chairs and a peg board on the wall. Andrew had tried to make his a little less impersonal by introducing a photograph of Laura and the boys on his desk and a framed Spy cartoon of Ranjitsinhji, taken from an old copy of *Vanity Fair*, on the wall opposite his desk. Ranji, thin, elegant and silk-shirted, leaned lightly on a dark brown bat and stared mournfully out at the room. He didn't seem to like it any more than Andrew did.

Meg sat in the chair opposite Andrew and lit a cigarette. She was a tall, slim woman in her early forties with auburn hair and an interesting face that looked as if it had seen just about everything and was highly sceptical about most of it. "Charles doesn't like the show," she said.

Andrew blinked. "You don't have to sugar the pill for me," he said. "Come right out with it. Give it to me straight."

"Well, there didn't seem any point in sodding around. He just doesn't like the show."

"But nobody likes it," Andrew said. "It's not the sort of show you're supposed to like. You just accept it. It's a sort of visual Muzak that helps you digest your tea. What else does anybody expect from television at six o'clock in the evening?"

"Charles says it's too bland."

"Bland? Of course it's bland. He's never complained about bland before. He likes bland."

"Well he doesn't any more apparently."

"Christ," Andrew said.

Meg nodded. "Exactly."

"What does he want then?"

"He says he wants something different."

"Okay. But what?"

Meg sighed, exasperated. "I don't know. He doesn't know either, of course. What do you want from him – ideas? He doesn't have ideas. He's just the Programme Controller – ideas are nothing to do with him. We're the ones who are supposed to have the ideas. All he knows is what he likes and what he doesn't like and right now what he doesn't like is our programme."

"He's never complained before," Andrew said again. "What do you suppose brought this on?"

She took a long, thoughtful drag on her cigarette and blew the smoke up towards the ceiling. "I think he's been got at. There's a funny mood around this place at the moment. I suspect it has something to do with bloody Mark Payne coming back."

"Mmmm. What are we going to do?"

Meg shrugged. "I don't know yet. There's not much we can do for this week anyway. We're pretty well committed already. Except for the main interview, of course. We might try and think of something spicy for that."

For a programme not due for transmission until Friday evening to be more or less locked up before noon on Monday was not altogether unusual in television, especially when the programme operated on such a small budget as *Capital Week*'s. A number of short, filmed items were already in the can and although these could in theory be scrapped if something better cropped up such drastic action was rarely taken. Filming and editing were expensive.

"What have we got so far?" Andrew asked.

"The children's art exhibition in South Kensington, that lunatic who's trying to grow square carrots in Balham, the housewives' theatre group who are putting on *Oedipus Rex* in Greek in somebody's front room. That's in Hampstead, of course . . ."

Andrew nodded. "Yes, well, it's bland all right. You

have to admit that. What would happen if we threw it all out and looked for something else?"

"We'd go over budget, that's what would happen."

"Charles wouldn't like that, would he?"

"No, Charles would not. Charles wants us to be not bland and different and cheap, that's what Charles wants. Especially cheap."

They were both silent for a minute or two, thinking deeply. Then Andrew said: "Well, that leaves us with the main interview, doesn't it? And what are we planning for that?"

"Not a lot right now. The front runner is that film director, whatsisname, the one we met yesterday."

"No!" Andrew actually thumped the desk with his fist. It hurt him rather more than he had expected but he didn't care. There were times when desk-thumping was the only way to underline a point. "I'm not having him on the programme. I hated that film. It was nasty and vicious – and so was he."

"I agree. But if we drop him we'll have to find somebody else, fast. Any suggestions?"

"No, not just now. But for God's sake there must be *somebody* in London worth talking to."

Meg got up and yawned and stretched. "True – but the problem is finding the buggers."

Andrew had lunch with Claudia in a pizza place at Shepherd's Bush. It was full of people from the BBC, whose offices and studios and personnel had come to dominate the whole area. Once this had been a strictly working-class district, predominantly black; but now wine bars and French restaurants were springing up and the terraced houses were being painted and refurbished and knocked through and Ford Granadas were parked in the streets as bright young television executives moved in. What remained of the indigenous black population looked on anxiously, defensively, helplessly in the face of the invasion of middle-class Oxbridge man, Media Man, and his middle-class Oxbridge wife.

The pizza place was fairly crowded but Andrew and Claudia found a table for two in the corner, hemmed in on three sides by ranks of TV denim – Current Affairs denim, Music and Arts denim, even a smattering of Light Entertainment denim. On the face of it this was a curious place to choose for privacy but what surrounded them was strictly BBC denim and between BBC and the commercial TV companies there was very little fraternisation. Andrew and Claudia had no friends or acquaintances here, although as they walked through the restaurant to their table Andrew was dimly aware that a few people on the Current Affairs tables recognised him. They nodded to him as if they knew him and he nodded back but no words were exchanged.

"What I'd like to know," Claudia said as they munched their pizza, "is which of those two girls you went off with yesterday. Was it Victoria or the small, dark one?"

Andrew glanced guiltily across the room to where an assistant producer of a Music and Arts programme was laughing desperately at the latest quip delivered by his editor and boss. As an impersonation of genuine mirth this laughter lacked conviction but what it didn't have in sincerity it made up for in volume. The editor, anyway, accepted it uncritically.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Andrew said.

Claudia laughed. "Bullshit," she said.

"No, please, come on. You seem to have this crazy idea that I'm always charging around chasing women."

"You're always chasing me," she said.

"Yes, but you're different. I love you."

She looked up at him angrily. "Shut up, Andrew. Of all the despicable tricks men use to get their leg across a girl, saying 'I love you' when you don't remotely mean it is about the nastiest."

"But I do mean it!" And he did. He had never told her so before but he did love her. "I don't know why I love you – God knows you give me no encouragement – but I do."

"You just love all women then," she said.

"No, I don't. Mind you, I *like* women . . ."

"That's a sexist remark to start with. 'I like women' indeed. You might as well say you like pork chops."

"As a matter of fact I do like pork chops. But I like women, too, only in a different way . . . Look, I don't know how else to put it. I *like* women. Okay? I like their company. But the trouble with you feminists is that a man can't win. If I say I like your company I'm being patronising and if I say I fancy you I'm a male chauvinist pig. If the future of the world was left to women like you, there'd never be another generation. Look . . . look at it this way: you're an intelligent, beautiful, sexy woman whether you like it or not and I'm just a man with all kinds of built-in responses to intelligent, beautiful, sexy women. And when I look at you all those responses come surging into action. I can't help it. I'm just made that way. But you hate me for it."

"I don't hate you, Andrew," she said.

He took a deep swig of the rough red house wine and filled his glass again. "Anyway, I'm fed up with this reputation I seem to have as a womaniser. It's Meg, isn't it? She's the one who keeps spreading these stories about me. She does it for laughs. She's a real mischief-maker, that Meg."

Claudia leaned across for the bottle and refilled her own glass. "All right," she said. "Let me ask you something. You've been married, what, about ten years now, right? Well, are you telling me that in that time you've never once been unfaithful?"

"Yes," he said but he had hesitated a moment too long. Claudia laughed again, a short, brittle laugh this time.

"Listen . . ."

"Eat your pizza, Andrew," she said. "It's not nice cold."

When they had finished the pizza and the ice cream and had moved on to coffee, he said: "Will you come out with me one evening?"

"No."

"Why not?"

"Because you'll only make a pass at me."

"No, I won't."

"Yes, you will. You always do." They had been out together three times in the past and what she said was quite true: he always made a pass at her. He never meant to; indeed he promised most faithfully not to but in the event the temptation was invariably too strong.

"Well, all right," he said. "What if I do? You can always fight me off. You're very good at that."

She said patiently: "You're a married man, Andrew. I don't mess about with married men. I don't want to be one of your bits on the side."

"I haven't got any bits on the side!" he yelped. "I don't know how to explain to you any more but I love you, I'm crazy about you . . ."

"Shall we get the bill?" she said.

Across the room the assistant producer from Music and Arts had forced himself to laugh so hard that he had swallowed his coffee the wrong way and now he had collapsed over the table, puce in the face, apparently choking to death, coffee dribbling from the corners of his mouth. His editor watched him with profound disgust.

In the taxi on the way back to Notting Hill Gate Claudia asked: "Are you coming to the production meeting this afternoon? Four o'clock."

"Yes, I . . ." And then he remembered. Caroline. Oh, Christ, Caroline Kaufman. "No, I . . . er . . . I have to see someone."

She shook her head sadly. "Have you any idea how guilty you look? It's just as well I know you haven't got a bit on the side or I'd think you had a bit on the side."

They rode in silence to the third floor in a crowded lift and walked in silence along the corridor to the door of the production office where she stopped and put her hand on his arm. He looked at her, miserably. "What?" he said.

"I don't hate you, Andrew," she said. "I really, really don't hate you."

5

The Kaufmans lived in a rather beautiful three-storey house in South Kensington. Andrew knew it quite well. The first time he had been there he had made love to Caroline Kaufman in the master bedroom; the second time it was in the hall; the third time in the kitchen. None of these locations, nor indeed the acts themselves, had been of his choosing. From the very beginning Caroline Kaufman had been in sole command of the proceedings.

Today as he approached the house there was an empty parking spot right outside the front door but he ignored it and drove on round the corner, delaying as long as possible the moment of his arrival. He wished now, as he had wished often in the past, that he had never begun this liaison; not, he told himself, that it was really his fault. Indeed, in a curious way Charles Kaufman was to blame.

About a year ago Andrew had been summoned to Kaufman's office. He had gone with some trepidation because the latest audience reaction figures to *Capital Week* had been none too healthy, reflecting an attitude that was but marginally on the bright side of indifference. Kaufman had instructed him to sit and then said: "I'd like to ask you a favour." Even asking a favour he had looked vaguely menacing, crouched burly and powerful behind his desk. "Will you take my wife to the opera tonight? I'd do it myself only I have to go to Geneva for a TV conference." He fished some tickets out of a drawer. "It's . . . er . . . *Turandot*. Pavarotti. Pavarotti's all right, isn't he?"

"Pavarotti's fine. Bit fat but he sings up a storm."

"So you'll do it then?"

"Well . . ." Andrew knew it would be all right with Laura because the Kaufmans were friends of the family – not of his family and certainly not personal friends of his (in fact he had never even met Mrs Kaufman) but Laura knew them both and her father and Kaufman were old mates from their early advertising days. "I'm very flattered but . . . why don't you ask Maurice? He's the arts expert."

"Maurice hates opera," Kaufman said. He seemed to approve of this attitude in his arts expert. "He hates the ballet, too. And most theatre . . . Well, anyway, that's not the point. The fact of the matter is that my wife specially requested that I should ask you."

"Why me?" Andrew said surprised.

"God knows. Well . . ." Kaufman hesitated, as if realising that such a response was not exactly tactful. "No, the thing is she says she's met all the other presenters and frontmen and whatnot around here but she's never met you and she thinks she'll be able to take a closer interest in what's going on if she knows everybody." He shook his head. "Women have funny ideas sometimes."

"Yes. Right, well, I'd be delighted to take her."

"Good." Now that the matter was settled Kaufman changed the ingratiating scowl he had been wearing hitherto for his ordinary, everyday scowl. He flicked the tickets briskly across the desk. "Pick her up about 6.30. Our address is on the envelope." As Andrew got up to leave, Kaufman said: "Seen the latest audience reaction figures?"

"Er . . . yes. Bit disappointing really."

"Disappointing? They're bloody disgraceful. I want to see a marked improvement next time round."

As Andrew reached the door, wondering how forceful the man might have been about the reaction figures if he hadn't had a favour to ask, Kaufman said: "Give my regards to your father-in-law."

"Old Maxie? Yes, of course."

"Maxie? Why do you call him Maxie? His name's Arthur."

"Maxie McCulper, the well-known Scottish sinner," Andrew explained.

Kaufman shook his head. "He doesn't sound particularly Scottish and I doubt very much whether he's any more of a sinner than the rest of us. Is Maxie his second name then? That doesn't sound very Scottish either."

"No, it's a joke," Andrew said. "Maxie McCulper. It's a sort of play on words."

"Is it?" Kaufman said.

The evening at the opera had gone very well. Mrs Kaufman, a former fashion model now somewhat on the voluptuous side, had seemed genuinely to enjoy Andrew's company. She had, indeed, treated him from the start with great affection, taking his arm and hugging it as they walked to and from his car and touching him a lot when they talked. Afterwards she had insisted on treating him to supper, waving aside his objections by saying that Kaufman would charge the meal to Nat-Met as legitimate business expenses. Andrew was greatly taken by her. She listened eagerly to everything he said, laughed at his jokes and was in turn an amusing conversationalist herself. And her habit of taking his hand and stroking it gently whenever the talk dealt with serious matters was by no means unpleasing. He was not, therefore, at all surprised or even unwilling when, back at her house for a nightcap, she took him in a strong embrace and kissed him fiercely.

Later on, however, as they lay in Kaufman's bed he was obliged to admit to himself that, on the whole, it could be argued that he hadn't exactly behaved very well. He had betrayed a trust, his employer's trust at that. He had expressed these anxieties to Caroline who had dismissed them briskly. In the first place, she said, Kaufman himself was almost certainly, at this very moment, in bed with some yodelling Swiss hooker and in the second place he, Andrew, had merely conducted himself as any gentleman would when escorting a lady to the opera.

Andrew allowed himself to be reassured, though he privately doubted whether any known book of etiquette would suggest that a gentleman escorting a lady to the opera should take it as part of his duties to give her a right seeing to.

The experience had, however, a profound effect upon him, for it underlined what he already suspected to be true: namely, that his weakness for women was such that if left alone with one who had an equal weakness for him he was powerless to deny her. Driving home that night he vowed that never again would he allow himself to be left alone with any such woman. It simply wasn't fair to Laura, not that Laura . . . well, that was another matter.

He hadn't seen Caroline Kaufman again for three months until, once more as a favour to her husband, he escorted her to the ballet. On that occasion she had seduced him in the hall, arguing that this was much more exciting than romping about on some old bed. And then, four months after that, he took her to a concert at the Queen Elizabeth Hall whereafter the scene of the action was the kitchen table. By this time he had come to the conclusion that Kaufman arranged his overseas trips to avoid having to take his wife to any public occasion that could remotely be described as cultural. He also began to wonder who else escorted Caroline Kaufman to such events, and what happened afterwards, when he himself was nôt granted the privilege – unless, of course, she only attended operas, ballets and concerts about three times a year which was possible but unlikely.

Anyway, their last outing together had been several months ago and he had thought, with some relief, that their affair was over. He had, indeed begun to feel quite virtuous because if you discounted yesterday's bout with Claire, and he was much inclined to do so, Caroline Kaufman had been his first and only extra-marital relation.

But twice in the last month she had phoned inviting him round in the afternoon. On both occasions he had managed to put her off but the second time the

conversation had ended on an ominous note, with Caroline saying: "Okay, buster, I'll let you get away with it now – just don't turn me down again. All right?"

So now here he was in South Kensington approaching her door and trying to persuade himself that he had come, not because he was afraid of what she might do if he didn't turn up, but to make a clean end to the liaison.

Caroline greeted him in a grey silk dress slashed almost to the navel. She was wearing no brassière. As she led him into the drawing-room he noticed that she had put on weight since the last time he saw her. Another pound or two, he thought, and voluptuous would be an understatement.

She offered him a drink and he accepted, with the proviso that he would take anything but whisky, and they sat together on a chaise longue facing the window.

"Well, what kind of a day have you had?" she asked, as if they had last met only at breakfast time.

"Not so good really. Your old man seems to have taken against my programme." He remembered something Meg had said. "Has he been got at, do you think?"

She shrugged, the untrammelled breasts wobbling distractingly under the grey silk. "Quite possibly. He saw a lot of Mark Payne over the weekend and he had dinner with your father-in-law last Friday."

"Did he indeed?" Andrew said, thoughtfully. "I didn't know that."

"Take your coat off," Caroline said. "Come on, I won't eat you." He was by no means convinced of that but he took his jacket off anyway, for it was warm in the room, and as he did so she deftly removed his tie as well.

"Caroline," he said, as she kissed him on the cheek, "do you really think we should be doing this? What if Charles . . ."

"Shut up about Charles," she said, undoing a couple of buttons of his shirt.

"No, but hang on. What if Charles found out? Have you thought of the consequences? He might . . . he might divorce you."

She laughed. "Charles wouldn't be such a fool. Divorce

me? And give up this house and my income? Ah, you didn't know that, did you? I'm quite a rich lady, my lad, much richer than good old Charles. My first husband was very big in biscuits."

"Biscuits?"

"Dog biscuits actually. You've no idea how much money there is in dog biscuits. I can't begin to understand what dogs see in them but they appear to be addicted to the things, thank God."

"I didn't know you were married before."

"Well, I wasn't for long. He was much, much older than me. A widower, as a matter of fact. I was strutting down the catwalk at some charity fashion show one day and he was sitting there looking old and widowed and deliciously wealthy, so I stuck my hip in his face and that was more or less that. He died of a heart attack six months after the wedding, very, very rich and with a happy grin on his lips."

"And you copped the lot?"

"No, not all of it. Most of it went to his son and daughter but there was quite a lot left over for me."

Andrew considered the situation. "Well, all right," he said. "If Charles found out it might not make any difference to you but it could make a hell of a difference to me."

"True," she said. "And that's a very good reason for you to lie back and think of England and let me have my evil way with you. You need a friend at court, sunshine."

"What?"

She sighed and undid the rest of his buttons. "Cast your mind back to the first time we went out together. *Turandot*, do you remember? Well, Charles wasn't too happy with your show then. In fact, he was thinking of making changes and who do you think saved your arse that time?"

Andrew was aghast. "Are you telling me that for the last year I've only kept my job because you . . . ?"

She shook her head. "No. Honestly, no. I came to the rescue on that occasion but I've never had to do it since. On the other hand, if you're in trouble again you could hardly have a more useful ally."

"I . . . I don't know what to say." He felt bemused, diminished somehow. "I mean, I'm grateful obviously. But . . . why did you do it?"

"Because I like you more than the others."

"Others? What others?"

She laughed. "Poor Andrew. It really isn't your day, is it? Did you think you were the only one, the great love of my life? Oh dear." She took her dress off, revealing a positive riot of voluptuousness. "Well, I have to tell you there have been others – not, if it's any consolation, from Nat-Met – but there have been others. Now lie still while I take your trousers off."

And Andrew was obediently lying still, consumed less by desire than by bewilderment and a general feeling of inadequacy, when a slight movement across the room caught his eye and he looked up to see a red-haired, red-bearded man leaning in through the open window, holding the curtain to one side with his arm and pointing a camera at him. Click, went the camera.

"Bloody hell!" said Andrew, panic-stricken. He leapt up, sending the naked Caroline sprawling on the carpet and himself tripping over his own trousers which were now around his ankles. By the time he had recovered and reached the window the man was gone. He was simply a back view heading for the corner of the street, his artificial foot beating a rapid tattoo on the pavement.

"What the hell . . ." said Caroline.

Andrew turned wildly towards her. "Didn't you see him?"

"See who?" she asked, rubbing one buttock.

"There was a man in a ginger wig and false beard taking pictures of us! Just here – through the window."

"Bollocks," she said.

"No, I promise you! He was taking photographs!"

She looked up at him coldly, reached for her dress and began to put it on. "Okay, Andrew. If you don't want to make love to me, okay. I should have thought you might have dreamed up some more plausible excuse but never mind. I take the point. I think you'd better go now."

"Caroline!" he said. "I'm not lying to you. There was a

man in a ginger wig . . . I've seen him before. I saw him yesterday, only he was . . . he was bald then."

"Right," she said, humouring him with heavy sarcasm. "Bald yesterday, ginger wig and false beard today. I suppose he had an eye patch, too."

"No! He's got an artificial leg . . ."

"Oh, great," she said, nodding. "An artificial leg, eh? Nice touch, Andrew. Now will you please put your clothes on and get out?"

He dressed, bleating protestations the while but she was not to be appeased. "Caroline," he said, as she led him formally, icily, to the front door, "I promise you, it's true. He was there! I saw him – with a camera."

As she usherered him out into the street she said: "I have two things to say to you, Andrew – one, from now on you have no friend at court and, two, when you leave here run, don't walk, to your nearest psychiatrist." And then she shut the door in his face.

The house was empty when Andrew got back: no sign of Laura, no note, nothing. He called the McCulper number to see if she was with her parents. Mrs McCulper answered the phone. No, she didn't know where Laura was; she didn't know where her husband was either. She said this timidly in a voice so soft that Andrew had to strain to hear her. It was almost as if she expected him to shout at her for being so ignorant and generally useless as not to know the whereabouts of her own family. The conversation lasted barely fifteen seconds, which was about par for the course with Mrs McCulper; she answered each question briefly and then waited patiently for the next one, volunteering no information or opinions of her own and saying "Sorry" a lot.

Andrew was not entirely displeased to have a little time to himself. He put it to good use by retrieving his cricket gear from the bag where it had been lying since Saturday evening and putting it in the washing machine. Then he cleaned his boots and pads and wiped his bat. When he had finished all these vital tasks he got himself

a couple of sandwiches and a glass of wine and consumed them thoughtfully in the drawing-room. He had much to think about for it had been a most disturbing day. There was, for a start, Kaufman's alarming reaction to the programme and whatever that might portend, especially with Mark Payne reappearing on the scene and needing a slot for his own show. Then there was the matter of Caroline Kaufman. The good news there was that the affair was now most certainly over but the bad news was that her manner had been markedly cold, even threatening. If her position within her own marriage was as secure as it seemed she might, if she felt scorned – and she had definitely given a very fair impersonation of a woman scorned – do almost anything to hit back at him.

And finally, and perhaps most worrying of all, there was the curious business of the man with the artificial leg. It was beyond coincidence that he should have turned up on two such awkward occasions purely by chance. He was obviously following Andrew about. But why? Who would have put him up to it? And what . . . oh, God . . . what were the photographs for? Andrew tried to remember whether he had ever seen the man before yesterday and was sure he hadn't. So perhaps . . .

On an impulse he dialled Claire's number. The phone rang for a long time and he was about to replace the receiver just at the moment when she answered.

"It's me," he said.

"Who?"

"Andrew. Andrew Weston."

In a fierce whisper, she said: "I've got my feller here, for Chrissake!"

"Oh, God. Look I'm awfully sorry but this is very important: do you know a bald man with a west country accent and an artificial leg?"

There was a sharp intake of breath at the other end of the line and then she muttered furiously: "What is this, a riddle? Are you phoning me up at a time like this to ask me fucking riddles?"

"No. No, I'm very serious. Do you know a bald man with . . ."

"You're drunk. You must be drunk. And if you're not drunk, you're mad . . ."

Andrew heard a man's voice and Claire, replying to it, saying, "No, it's all right, darling. It's just an obscene phone call." And then she replaced the receiver.

It hadn't, Andrew was obliged to confess to himself, been an altogether satisfactory conversation and perhaps it hadn't been a particularly good idea to ring at all. But at least he was pretty sure now that Claire didn't know who the man was either. Not that there was any real reason why she should unless . . . and it was this faint hope that had prompted the phone call . . . he had turned out to be some possessive boy friend of hers who had seen her and Andrew arrive together at the flat and, overwhelmed by jealousy, had set out to discredit Andrew in her eyes by . . .

No, rubbish. But in that case, he thought again, who could possibly have . . .

Laura! It was the most logical and the most horrifying answer. Laura had engaged the man to follow him about. But, once more – why? He had done nothing to arouse her suspicions unless . . . unless somehow she had found out about Caroline Kaufman. That was it; that had to be it, because until yesterday there had been nobody else to find out about. Laura and her parents, or at least Laura and her father, moved in the same circles as the Kaufmans (Mrs McCulper didn't seem to move in any circles) and Caroline could have confided in a girl friend, who could have confided in another girl friend, who could have . . .

And while he was speculating thus Laura came home. She greeted him with a perfunctory kiss and said: "Are you planning to leave that plate and that glass on the table there? They won't get into the dish-washer by themselves, you know." She was a rather houseproud woman.

Andrew removed the offending articles and she followed him into the kitchen. "Where were you this afternoon?" she asked.

"Me?" Andrew said, guiltily.

She looked all around the room with exaggerated care.

"I don't see anybody else here," she said, "so I think you may take it that I'm addressing you."

"Ah, yes. Well, I was out. Working."

"Mmm. That's what they said when I phoned your office. Daddy took me to a cocktail party at the Savoy. Some advertising thing. I thought you might like to come."

"Why?"

She sighed. "Well, we are married," she said. "Husbands and wives quite often go out together."

"That's not fair. I'm always asking you to come to functions with me and you never do."

"Oh, those are television things," she said, scornfully. "This was different. Apart from anything else you'd have made some useful contacts for when you come back into the business."

This was a very old bone of contention between them. Neither Laura nor her father had ever forgiven him for leaving the family firm. He had done so, more or less on impulse, soon after McCulper had moved into the village and Andrew had found his life so dominated by his father-in-law that he seemed to be in danger of losing his own identity entirely. An old friend from his Cambridge days who was then something of significance in Nat-Met had offered him a job as a researcher and he had taken it eagerly. Laura had been furious with him; he had been on the verge of being offered a junior partnership, she said, with all the perks that that entailed – a higher salary, a handsome expense account, lots of foreign travel, a bigger car . . . Andrew had tried to explain that he was merely making a bid for independence, both his and hers. They had been far too beholden to her father; it was more than time that they struck out on their own, built their own lives, made their own decisions . . .

Laura had been singularly unimpressed by this argument. There were thousands, very possibly millions, of young men all over the world, she said, who would happily change places with Andrew, marry the boss's daughter and plunge with a contented sigh into just such a cocoon of security as now surrounded him. But this

honourable fate was not good enough for Andrew, was it? Goodness gracious her, no. He had to sink his fangs into the hand that fed him, snapping off its index finger, and plunge himself and his family into penury by taking an ill-paid nonsense of a job with some tacky little television company. She knew why, of course – her oath, she did. Andrew had always resented Daddy, hadn't he? And for the life of her she couldn't see why. Daddy had always been a prince to them, an absolute pussy-cat . . .

Secretly, Andrew admitted his resentment of this grey/puce pussy-cat who dominated their lives so thoroughly, who had bought them the kind of house that Andrew could not possibly afford, who inserted himself as an impenetrable barrier between Andrew and his own sons and who had insisted when the twins were born that Laura should give up work, on the grounds that no grandchildren of his were going to be brought up by some nanny.

Laura had resented this enforced retirement and on her behalf Andrew had resented it, too. Privately he believed that children were probably better off with a mother in attendance but, on the other hand, he knew it was easy for him to say this. He was not the mother and his was not the career that would have to be sacrificed for the sake of the children. So if Laura wished to return to work he would support her. After all, on their combined salaries they could easily afford a nanny.

But McCulper would have none of this. Laura must give up work and attend to her children. But lest she should feel that she had been shunted into a backwater and left there without oars or outboard motor, his firm would pay her an annual retainer as a "consultant". Laura, devoted to her father, had in the end obediently swallowed the pill and been grateful for the sugar that coated it. And after a while she had managed, somehow, to convince herself that it was Andrew who had made her abandon her career and Daddy who had come to her rescue with the lifeline of a retainer.

When Andrew left the family firm to join Nat-Met at a considerable drop in salary, McCulper made up the

shortfall by increasing his daughter's stipend. Andrew had objected then and again later when, with an increase in pay, he became the presenter of *Capital Week*, arguing that as the head of his own small household it was his duty and privilege to earn the corn. But both Laura and her father had overridden his objections. "You don't want me to do anything, do you?" Laura had declared, with her well-known penchant for rhetorical questions. "You don't want me to have a life of my own. You just want me to stay here and look after the boys, don't you? Well, all I can say is 'thank God for Daddy'."

A year ago when the twins had gone off, with McCulper's permission, to boarding school, Laura had, again with McCulper's permission, started working part-time with her father's company. It was Andrew, seeing how bored she was at home with nothing at all to do, who had suggested this move but somehow, once more, he found himself in the role of the man in the black hat while McCulper was the white-hatted, fast-shooting hero who had come to his daughter's rescue.

Now, looking back over the marriage, it seemed to Andrew that they had had one good year followed by nine lean years. He couldn't remember anything in the original contract that had said it should be so but perhaps, he thought, he hadn't read the small print carefully enough. The problem, he felt, was McCulper. If only they could shake off the man's baleful influence there was surely no reason why they shouldn't forget the nine lean years and start again at the beginning . . . although this might be rather difficult to achieve if Laura had taken to employing people to spy on him.

In an attempt to clear up this matter, he said: "Oh, by the way, do you happen to know a bald man with a west country accent and an artificial leg? He wears a ginger wig sometimes. And a beard. And . . ."

"What *are* you talking about?" Laura said, making herself a cup of instant coffee.

"Well, I sort of bumped into this fellow . . ."

"A bald man with a ginger wig, a false beard, an artificial leg and a west country accent? Now where

would I meet somebody like that? Where would *anybody* meet somebody like that?"

"Well, yes," Andrew said. "He is a bit unusual but somehow I got the impression that you . . ."

"Then you got the wrong impression. I've never met anyone like that in my life and on the whole I'm rather glad of it."

He believed her and, changing the subject, he said: "Was Oliver at the party?"

"Well, yes, he was. Daddy invited him. And incidentally he had an awful time this morning, poor old boy. Glued to the lavatory until nearly midday. He says it was all your fault for forcing whisky on him last night. Anyway, he was a lot better this evening and he told me the most marvellous story about Hadrian . . ."

"Adrian who?" Andrew said. He didn't know anyone named Adrian.

"Not Adrian – Hadrian. The one who built the wall. Roman bloke – remember? Dear God, you're ignorant. Anyway, Hadrian . . ."

Andrew allowed his mind to glaze over as his wife recounted her annals of ancient Rome, or at least of an ancient Roman. One thing was quite clear to him – it hadn't been Laura who set the bald man onto him. And it hadn't been Claire either, not even inadvertently. So who was it?

The answer came to him later as he lay in bed pondering. It was Kaufman. It had to be Kaufman. It was Kaufman, not Laura, who had found out belatedly about the affair with Caroline and . . .

He fell asleep and dreamed that Eamonn Andrews burst in upon him shouting "This is your life!" as he lay humping Claire in her bedroom and a leering Kaufman came out from behind the curtain as the first mystery guest and started distributing obscene photographs of Andrew and Caroline to the studio audience . . .

6

Andrew spent Tuesday morning in the cutting-room, watching the snippets of film that had already been prepared for Friday's programme. The cutting-room was small, square and gloomy and tucked away in the basement. Much of the floor space was filled with cans of film and the rest of it was largely taken up by metal racks from which more film hung down in long strips like drying seaweed. In an attempt to brighten the place, the editor and his assistant had covered the walls with *Playboy* centrefolds and page three nudes from the *Sun*. Andrew sat in front of the Steenbeck machine, peering at the tiny screen and trying to ignore the stern, unblinking gaze of a hundred eighteen-year-old nipples. The light in the room was dim and dusty.

What he saw on the Steenbeck screen did not encourage him, whether he played it backwards or forwards, fast or slow. The children's art exhibition was cute and that was about all that could be said for it, while the man from Balham, the one who grew square carrots, was undoubtedly mad. Andrew, accompanied by Meg, watched his interview with the man in a silence broken only by the snip of the film editor's scissors as he cut out another picture from the *Sun*.

On the film the Balham man, who was bald and elderly and wore a grey walrus moustache stained with nicotine, was insisting that he had deliberately grown the carrots square for commercial reasons. Square carrots were easier to pack into tins than long, thin carrots; therefore he was going into square carrots in a big way, devoting his entire garden (an area about 20 feet by 15) *and* his allotment

to the things, that's how serious he was. This statement led to a cutaway shot of Andrew, wearing the faintly desperate smile of an embarrassed man trying to pretend he's having a good time and pointing out the fallacy in the carrot-grower's argument: namely, that most tins were round, not square. Wasn't this, he asked, a classic case of a square carrot in a round hole? The man said he had considered this but had come to the conclusion that there was no demand for round carrots and besides the shape of the containers was the canners' problem, not his. This reply was delivered with much solemnity and with no acknowledgment at all of Andrew's little jest. There then followed a close-up of the man's finger, thick and black as to the nail, pointing at his crop – about half a dozen carrots of varying sizes which did indeed look vaguely square or at least sort of rectangular. Over this there was a bit of discussion about taste and texture. The man said he had only eaten one of the things and it was somewhat wooden but he didn't see this as presenting any difficulty. Once carrots had been processed and stuffed into tins, he said, nobody expected them actually to taste like carrots anyway. The film ended with Andrew standing alone in the middle of the vegetable patch asking the camera whether this was the shape of things to come and whether the world could now look forward to oblong peas and hexagonal beetroots.

"Pretty naff, isn't it?" Meg said as she wound the film back.

"Well, he's mad," Andrew said. "But at least he has got square carrots. Well, squarish."

"You ever grown carrots?" said the film editor. "They come in all kinds of shapes. Grow enough of 'em and there's a fair chance one or two will turn out sort of square."

"Yes, but he says he did it deliberately."

"Bloody liar then, isn't he?" The film editor tore down a nude from the wall beside the Steenbeck and replaced it with the picture he had just cut out. "Don't do that," Andrew said. "I liked that one. She had a nice smile."

"This one's got bigger tits," said the film editor.

"It's always quantity with you, isn't it?" Andrew said. "Never quality."

"I like big tits," said the film editor. He removed the rewound carrots film and laced up the next reel.

Meg said: "This is the Hampstead film. You know, the housewife who's putting on *Oedipus Rex* in her kitchen or something. It'll need a bit of setting up in the studio – you'll have to explain who Oedipus was and who Sophocles was . . ."

". . . and what 'rex' means," Andrew said, nodding gloomily. *Capital Week*, and come to that Nat-Met generally, worked on the assumption that the average viewer had an I.Q. which barely stumbled into double figures. "All right, let's see it."

They returned, disheartened, to the production office just before lunch time. In the normal week they wouldn't have been too unhappy with what they had in the can – not exultant, perhaps, but not too unhappy. Now, however, with Kaufman's recent strictures in mind they had to admit that what they were about to offer the London public was not only bland but virtually meaningless.

There was a message for Andrew: Victoria, the film publicist, had phoned twice, wanting to know the arrangements for the studio interview with Julian Russell.

"I'm not having him on the programme," Andrew said stubbornly to Meg.

She shrugged. "All right, if you insist. But what's the alternative?" They spent a few minutes discussing various possibilities, none of them too hopeful. In the end they decided to put in a bid for a member of the Greater London Council who wanted to turn Regent's Park into a collective farm. And with that settled Meg went off to keep a lunch date and Andrew wandered away in search of Claudia, only to discover that she had gone to lunch with Mark Payne.

"Mark bloody Payne!" Andrew said bitterly on receipt of this bad news. Jealousy welled up inside him. For all his well-known personality defects – conceit, for example, pomposity, arrogance – Payne was bound to be regarded as a formidable rival, for he was not only richer and more

famous than Andrew but he was also single. And Claudia only went out with single men. She wouldn't – no, surely she wouldn't – be influenced by the wealth and the fame but she might, quite easily, be attracted by the man's marital, or rather lack of marital, status. The thought of her romantically involved with Mark Payne – he couldn't even contemplate the idea of physical involvement – was unbearable to Andrew

Brooding unhappily he went to the canteen for a coffee and a sandwich and found Maurice Bowles there, reading the cricket reports in the *Guardian*. Maurice, too, it transpired when Andrew joined him, was unhappy and not only because Ian Botham had been bowled for a duck the previous day. This was, certainly, his greatest cause for grief but there was also the not entirely unimportant fact that all his plans for this week's programme had collapsed about him. He had been intending, through an interpreter, to interview an avant-garde composer who had recently defected from Albania and spoke no English but the man had elected at the last moment to appear on the *South Bank Show* instead, on the undeniable grounds that it had a much larger audience. Maurice was left, therefore, with a blank space to fill.

On an impulse Andrew said: "I've got just the man for you. Julian Russell."

"Who?"

"Film director. A Londoner, youngish – well, very young, actually. Just made his first movie."

"What's it like?" Maurice asked, not yet much impressed.

"The man from *Time Out* thinks it's a masterpiece."

Maurice brightened. "That bad, eh?"

"Well, it wasn't the regular film critic who said that," Andrew admitted in the interests of candour. "It was a stand-in – a pimply bloke, about nineteen, with a C.S.E. in woodwork."

"Good enough," Maurice said. "What about, whats-isname, Russell?"

"Well, he's cocky, pretentious, self-indulgent – rather like his film, really."

Maurice leaned solemnly across the table and shook Andrew's hand. "You've saved my life," he said. "I'll get Russell and the pimply bloke together, let them discuss the movie, show a few clips . . . Who do I arrange it with?"

Andrew gave him Victoria's telephone number and as a practical demonstration of his gratitude Maurice bought him another coffee. After that they got down to the serious business of discussing the county cricket championship. Andrew was glad to do so because it stopped him thinking about Claudia and Mark Payne.

When he got back to his office the phone was ringing. He lifted the receiver, identified himself and Victoria said: "Hello, darling." This was a new and startling development in their relationship. She had never called him "darling" before; nor was there any reason why she should. Andrew, recovering swiftly from the shock of hearing himself so addressed, assumed that it was some kind of show business affectation and not to be taken seriously. Even so, he thought guiltily, it had been quite pleasurable to hear her say it.

"About Julian, darling," she said, "and the interview on Friday . . ."

"Ah, yes," Andrew said, plunging in immediately. It seemed the best way. "Well, look, we won't be able to do it after all. Something else has come up and . . ."

"What! You promised. You can't squirm out of the deal now. Julian's expecting to be on your programme. You can't do this to me!"

Her voice was icy and she wasn't, Andrew noticed, calling him "darling" any more. He began to bleat into the telephone. "No, hang on. There was nothing I could . . . Circumstances beyond our control . . . Look, believe me, sweetheart . . ."

"Don't call me 'sweetheart'."

"Sorry. Well, listen, I've fixed something else for you. Maurice Bowles is desperately keen to interview him on *Culture* and . . ."

There was a sharp intake of breath at the other end. "What? You're fobbing me off with *Culture*? Thanks a

bunch! Nobody watches fucking *Culture* except Maurice Bowles's mum. You realise I could lose my job over this, don't you? I've told everybody – Julian, the company, the distributors, everybody – that he's going to be on your show on Friday. I mean, God knows not many people watch your show either but at least it has a measurable audience and now I have to go back and say the poor sod's got to appear on bloody *Culture* instead . . ."

"Maurice will be phoning you this afternoon," Andrew said, feebly.

"Oh, great! Remind me to do you a favour some time. Meanwhile, get stuffed!" And she hung up.

During the afternoon Andrew wrote and recorded brief voice-over scripts for the three films he had seen that morning. Claudia didn't appear after lunch; she was out, Meg said, researching a potential item for next week's programme, an interview with the wife of a London M.P. who was trying, with the aid of similar wives, to persuade Parliament to meet earlier and finish earlier because late-night sittings were playing havoc with the politicians' sex lives. It was a case, Meg said, of Members rising late in the house and not at all at home and anyway, whatever else, it wasn't bland.

At first Andrew was not convinced by this explanation of Claudia's whereabouts, for jealousy still gnawed at him and he half suspected that she had gone somewhere for the afternoon with Mark Payne. But he was greatly reassured when, returning from the men's room, he saw Payne standing in the doorway of a rather large office instructing a couple of menials as to where he wanted them to put his cocktail cabinet.

"Hello, Mark," he said, relieved enough actually to greet the man.

Payne nodded curtly. "Hello, Alan," he said.

On balance Andrew decided it was more dignified not to correct him. He returned to his office, answered a letter or two, invented some expenses for last week and decided to go home.

Oliver Lloyd was in the foyer downstairs, reading an ancient copy of *Punch*.

"Good God," Andrew said. "You're not joining us, too, are you? Oliver, please, for your own sake, I implore you – think better of it. Tear up the contract, run away, hide, emigrate, anything. You won't like it here, honestly you won't."

Oliver smiled, half-heartedly. "No. No. It's just that . . . well, Charles – Charles Kaufman, you know – he asked me if I'd take Caroline to the opera tonight. She's meeting me here."

"Really?" Andrew said, a delicious, malicious sense of glee building up inside him. "I didn't know you knew the Kaufmans."

"Er, yes, well, Arthur introduced me to them a few weeks ago. It seems," Oliver simpered, "that Caroline's a sort of fan of mine, wants to get to know me better, you know."

"Yes, well, she will," Andrew said. "I can promise you that. She'll certainly get to know you a lot better tonight."

"What do you mean?" Oliver asked.

"Oh, you'll see. Well, enjoy the opera – and the après-opera. Caroline's particularly good on the après-opera." On which enigmatic note he left the building, feeling that the day had finished on a rather better note than it had started.

Outside he paused for a moment, looking around for any signs of a bald man, or a bewigged man, or a ginger-bearded man and listening for the sounds of an artificial foot tapping the pavement. There was, he noted with relief, an absence of any of those things. Perhaps, he thought as he retrieved his Renault from the car park, Kaufman had now set the fellow onto Oliver, his wife's latest escort. It was such a pleasing notion that he was quite unaware of the fact that, for much of the journey home, he was followed by a Ford Escort driven by a man in a bowler hat and a neat, military moustache; or that in the window of the Escort was a small sign announcing that the driver was disabled.

When he got home he found a note from Laura.

"Dining at Daddy's" it said. "Join us." He drove the half-mile to The House and found the family watching television, Laura sprawled elegantly on a settee, McCulper slumped in an armchair with a large Scotch beside him, Mrs McCulper tucked away silently in the shadows in the corner of the room, knitting something. It was hard to tell exactly what it was she was knitting: it was long and sort of greyish and could have been anything from a scarf to a giant sock.

"Help yourself to a drink," McCulper said. "Dinner's at eight thirty."

Andrew poured himself a glass of wine. "I won't be able to stay for dinner, I'm afraid. I have to get to the pavilion for the selection meeting. Got to pick the team for Saturday's match."

"Are you deliberately avoiding me?" Laura asked. "You weren't around on Sunday when the boys had to go back to school, you weren't around for the cocktail party last night and now you're off to booze it up at the pavilion."

McCulper chuckled. "Selection meeting, eh? Getting together the usual choice collection of the halt and the blind, I suppose. How many did you lot score last year? Twenty-odd, was it? Thirty? Well you'll be damn lucky to get half that this time, I can tell . . ."

Andrew smiled, thinly, and went away. The only sound he could hear as he left the house, apart from the murmur of the television, was the click of Mrs McCulper's knitting needles.

The playing strength of the Martindale Cricket Club numbered seventeen, or nineteen if you counted Jake's father, who was sixty-nine but still willing to turn out in emergencies, and a twelve-year-old who had announced that he would be available for selection from the start of the school holidays. This week, however, the choice was limited to fourteen people, two players being ill or injured and another abroad on business for his firm; not that any of this mattered too much in the circumstances.

Armed with the obligatory pints of bitter without which no cricket team has ever been chosen in the annals of the game, the selection committee – or rather three-quarters of it, Jake, Henry and Andrew – gathered round a table in the corner of the pavilion bar and began their deliberations.

"Old Phil's late," said Jake. "Not like him. Never mind, though – don't need him really. Same team as last Saturday?"

"Why not?" said Henry. Last Saturday's had been the strongest team at the club's disposal and all the players being available again there seemed no point in changing a winning side.

Jake began to copy out the team sheet in his large, careful handwriting. "Wonder who old McCulper's got this year?" he said. "Dowsett and Batchford for sure, I suppose. But by Golly, I hope he doesn't bring that curry-wallah again." Dowsett and Batchford were the two former first-class cricketers who had, between them, won five England caps in an earlier age; while the curry-wallah – and any racialist slur implied in the words was quite negated by the admiration with which Jake spoke of him – was the Indian leg-spinner who had wrought such destruction last summer. "How many did he end up with?"

"Nine for 16," Andrew said. "In ten overs. Five maidens." In his mind's eye he could still see the pack of short legs and silly mid-offs that had clustered eagerly around the Martindale batsmen, poor, bemused batsmen who were subjected to an assortment of leg-breaks, googlies and top spinners such as they had never previously dreamed of or even had nightmares about. And in his more dramatic moments he was given to insisting that sometimes he woke up at night, sweating with fear, and hearing the angry buzz of the ball that dismissed him as it looped implacably through the air. "Still, at least they didn't bring that Jamaican last time."

"Didn't need him, did they?" said Jake. "Not with the coolie there. But, by God, that Jamaican – he was a bit quick, wasn't he? Remember him, year before last? When

he knocked Billy's middle stump out and it went at the wicket-keeper like a bloody spear? Just for a second there I thought it had gone right through him."

Henry returned from the bar, bearing replenished tankards. "If they've got Batchford and Dowsett it doesn't matter all that much who else they bring. Those two are capable of winning the game on their own."

"Defeatist talk," said Jake. "I won't have it. We're going to win this year. I can feel it in my bones. We've got a much better side than last time, what with me and Phil opening and . . . That reminds me, where can old Phil have got to?"

As if on cue the pavilion door opened and there, massive and tragic, stood Phil himself, his great head of curly black hair bowed down, his brewer's goitre of a stomach slumping dispiritedly over his waistband. "I can't play," he said.

"What?"

"I can't play. The wife won't let me." He shambled into the room, emanating misery and sat, alone, at a table a little away from his fellow-selectors. "She wants to go and see her mother on Saturday, in bloody Leeds, and she says I've got to go too. I wouldn't mind only she doesn't even like her mother. Nobody likes her bloody mother. Oh God!"

"Put her on a train," Andrew said.

"She won't go by train. Says she gets sick on trains."

Henry said: "Well, lend her your car. She can drive."

"She won't drive herself. Not all that way. Says the motorways frighten her. No, I've got to take her. Biggest match of the year and I've got to take her all the bloody way to Leeds to see a woman nobody likes." He passed his hand over his eyes and his lower lip quivered. "It's deliberate, you know. She's doing it deliberate. I thought . . . I should've . . . I should've known summat was up. She's been dead quiet these last couple of days, too quiet. It's . . . well, it's my own bloody silly fault, too. See, I said I'd take her shopping last Saturday. Get a new carpet for the lounge and, well, I forgot and I played cricket instead. I should have bloody known! Never said

a word, she didn't, not till I'd had me tea tonight and I was just leaving for the selection meeting. And then she sprang it on me. Bloody Leeds! That's why I'm late, you see – been arguing with her all this time. Well, pleading really. But it's no good. She won't let me play and that's that." He wiped his nose roughly with the back of his hand. "Oh God, why did I ever get married?"

The other three selectors looked at each other and shrugged, helplessly. Henry said: "Never mind, Phil. I'm sure you did your best. To talk her round, I mean. Look, have a drink and cheer up."

Phil brightened for a moment and then the happy light faded from his eyes. "No, I'd better not. She's put me on a diet and all. Says I'm getting fat. It's not even true – I've *got* fat. I've been near sixteen stone for two years now and it's never bothered her – not till this minute when she's got it bloody in for me. Oh god, I hate women!" He got up and stumbled to the door where he paused and, with his back still turned to his co-selectors, mumbled, "Good luck for Saturday, lads. Sorry I've let you down." And then he lurched off into the night.

There was silence for some while after he had gone. Then Jake said: "Them little ones are always the worst, them small women. Big man marries a small woman, he's asking for trouble. I've seen it . . . oh, more times than I can remember."

"Pretty little thing, isn't she," Andrew asked, "Phil's wife?"

"Yes. Oh, yes. Pretty enough. Hard eyes on her, though, and a tongue like a cat-o'-nine-tails. My oath, she won't half give him gyp all the way up to Leeds . . ."

"Yes," Henry said, "I've no doubt she will but that's Phil's problem, not ours. Our problem is, who do we replace him with?"

There were only three possibilities and of those one was an overweight fifteen-year-old who played in glasses and was frightened of the ball and another was already committed to playing for the local college of further education. (With the school holidays not yet begun the twelve-year-old was out of the question and

Jake's dad was, according to his son, suffering from twinges.)

"So it's got to be Dermot then," Jake said.

"Oh, Christ, not Dermot," said Andrew and Henry in unison.

"Got to be. Anyway, he'll be all right, Dermot – not up to Phil's mark, I grant you. We'll miss Phil all right. But he bats a bit, Dermot does, bowls a bit."

"He hardly bats at all," Andrew said. "I've never seen him score more than ten. And he doesn't like bowling because it hurts his ear." This Dermot bowled – when he bowled at all – very fast leg-breaks whose great pace and sometimes vicious spin were surpassed only by their inaccuracy. With Dermot bowling nobody from deep point to the square leg umpire could truly consider himself safe and out of the line of fire. To complicate matters further, Dermot's bowling action necessitated bringing his arm over so close to his head that it brushed his ear, causing it to redden and occasionally to swell quite painfully.

"No, come on, be fair," Jake said. "On his day he can be unplayable, Dermot."

"When was he last unplayable?" Henry asked.

"Year before last," Jake answered at once. "I remember it clearly. Against Westwell, it was. He took five for 12 in two overs."

"I remember that," Andrew said. "There was a six and two wickets in the first over and another six and three wickets in the second and there were five wides altogether. One of them damn nearly hit gully full toss on the head. He just got his hand up in time, otherwise he'd have been a hospital case. Ron, it was. Best catch he took all season."

"Yes, well," Jake admitted. "I'm not saying Dermot isn't erratic. But you never know, it could be one of his days and . . . oh, sod it, he's all we've got and there's an end to it." So saying he scratched Phil's name ferociously off the team sheet and wrote in Dermot's name instead.

"Buggers up the batting order," Henry said. "You can't put Dermot in first in Phil's place. Nine would be too high for him."

"Then I'll open with Elvis," Jake said, "and you can come in first wicket down, Henry, and after that . . . Well, sod it, I'll work it out on the day. Come on, let's have another pint."

Andrew returned home about half-past ten, slightly woozy from too much beer, slightly downcast by the shock-horror announcement of Phil's withdrawal from Saturday's team. Both as opening batsman and brisk, left-arm seamer Phil would be missed and in neither capacity could Dermot be reasonably expected to serve as an adequate replacement. The omens were decidedly not good.

Laura was not yet back from her parents' home. Andrew considered calling her and then decided against it for fear that McCulper would answer the phone and jeer at him again. Instead he went to bed and was nearly asleep by the time Laura came in an hour or so later.

7

Henry Tyson was attending a charity dinner in London on Wednesday night and, as Sue would be driving up later to join him, had decided to leave his own car at home. Andrew gave him a lift into Town.

"There's a man following me," Andrew said, as they turned onto the motorway.

"Well, I expect there is," Henry said. "There are lots of cars following us, most of them driven by men. This is a busy time of the day."

"No, not now. Generally, I mean. There's a man following me around."

"What sort of man? And why?"

"I don't know. I mean, I know what he's like – he's a bald man with a ginger wig and a false beard and an artificial leg . . . No, don't laugh. I'm serious. What I don't know is why he's following me."

"How do you know he's following you? I mean, when did you first notice him?"

"Sunday afternoon. When I left that girl's flat – Claire, you know, the one I told you about . . . yes, well, he was outside her flat as I came out. And then on Monday – it was pretty alarming really – we were in this ground-floor room, me and this woman . . ."

"Claire, yes, I remember her name," Henry said, nodding.

"No, not Claire. It was another woman."

Henry turned and looked at him with interest. "You do put yourself about a bit, don't you? Tell me, have you always been like this or is it a new hobby you've just taken up?"

Andrew shook his head vehemently. "No! It's not like that . . . well, it is like that but . . . It's really not my fault . . . well, not altogether my fault . . . Look, it's too complicated to go into right now. What I really want to talk to you about . . ." And he told Henry of Kaufman and Caroline, of the bearded apparition at the window, of the clicking camera and the tap of the artificial foot on the pavement. "And I can't figure out what it's all about," he said finally.

"Well, if you will sleep with the boss's wife," Henry said, "you might quite easily be deemed to be pushing your luck a bit. But apart from that, have you any other reason to suppose that Kaufman might have it in for you?"

"Well, he's been knocking the programme lately. Doesn't seem to like it really."

Henry nodded thoughtfully. "The two things could easily be connected. But . . . What do you want from me – advice?"

"Got any to offer?"

"Not really, except to give up all this screwing around. It doesn't seem to be doing you a lot of good, does it? I'll tell you what, when you feel time sort of hanging heavy on your hands, instead of leaping into bed with the nearest available woman, why don't you go home to Laura?"

Andrew was silent.

"Sorry," Henry said. "That wasn't a very clever thing to say. Not getting along too well, are you, you and Laura?"

"No."

"Is it because of these other women, do you think?"

Andrew shook his head. "No. I'm pretty sure she doesn't know about them and I'm certain it wasn't Laura who sicced this bald-headed bloke on to me. No, the simple fact of the matter is that she just doesn't like me very much at the moment. I seem to irritate her."

"Do you like her?"

Andrew was silent again. It was a question he had been trying for some time not to face because he simply did not know the answer.

Henry said: "Has your father-in-law got anything to do with Laura's attitude? He doesn't like you either, does he?"

"No. He's never liked me. He didn't want her to marry me in the first place and he's never forgiven me for dropping out of his firm." He sighed. "I don't know . . . nobody seems to like me at the moment."

Leonard Wishman was coming out of the production office as Andrew went in. As was his custom on all such encounters, Andrew wished him good morning.

"Leave me alone," Wishman said.

Meg was sprawling thoughtfully behind her desk, her feet up on the surface alongside the typewriter in a pose that had only become possible for women since they'd been liberated by trousers. She was removing part of the morning doughnut from her teeth with a paper-clip.

"What's the matter with Leonard?" Andrew asked.

"Oh, he's been expecting a letter from the Princess and it hasn't come yet. I think he's beginning to suspect there's somebody else."

"Do you think he's all right?"

"No, of course he's not all right. He's as daft as a brush."

"What I mean is, do you think he's having a nervous breakdown or something? It just seems strange to me, a fellow like him writing all those letters to the Princess of Wales."

"I dare say lots of men write letters to the Princess of Wales. And Sophia Loren. And Meryl Streep. And Selena Scott."

"Yes, but you don't expect it of a floor manager."

"Why not?" Meg said, belligerently. "A floor manager's got as much right to be barmy as anyone else. Besides, he doesn't bother anybody and he's a very good floor manager. In any case, if he's fixated on the Princess of Wales that's his problem, not ours."

It was always the same, Andrew reflected sadly,

remembering that last night Henry had said much the same thing about Phil and his marital difficulties: nobody had time any more for other people's problems.

"Anyway," Meg said, removing her feet from the desk top and sitting up briskly. "We've got troubles of our own. You remember that G.L.C. councillor – the one I was telling you about who wants to turn Regent's Park into a collective farm? Well, we can't get him. He's in Russia, looking at collective farms."

"Strewth. What are we going to do now?"

Meg spread her hands, signifying defeat. "You tell me. I'm out of ideas."

"What about that M.P.'s wife, the one Claudia went to see yesterday, the one who says politics is ruining her sex life? Couldn't she come in this Friday instead of next?"

Meg consulted a typed memo on her desk. "Apparently not. Claudia says there are three wives involved and they want to do it together . . . Don't look like that, Andrew. This is no time for schoolboy smut. What she means is that they're prepared to be interviewed together but not singly and two of them are away until next week. So that's out. I never thought I'd hear myself say this but thank God for Julian Russell."

Mild panic seized Andrew. "But we haven't got Julian Russell. I gave him to Maurice Bowles."

"Then get him back from Maurice Bowles. Now! He may be an arsehole but we need him!"

Andrew said: "Look, couldn't we get Claudia to persuade this woman . . ."

"No! I've told you, they won't do it alone. And anyway Claudia's not here. She's with Charles Kaufman."

"What for?"

"I don't know what for. How should I know what for? He rang through just before you turned up and said he wanted her. I didn't ask what for. It didn't seem to be any of my business. Even Claudia didn't ask what for – she just went. And now it's time for you to go. Stop buggering about and get Julian Russell back from Maurice Bowles as fast as you can."

So Andrew went – up to the next floor where he found Maurice alone in his office throwing darts at a large picture of Herbert Von Karajan. Much practice had given Maurice a considerable skill at this and he had achieved a nice grouping around the end of the nose.

Andrew got down to business right away. "I need Julian Russell," he said.

"No, no," said Maurice, retrieving his darts, "nobody needs Julian Russell. I've spoken to the man on the phone and it's inconceivable that anyone could possibly need him. I don't know whether you're aware of this," he added solemnly, "but the fellow is an arsehole."

"Of course he's an arsehole! But I need him. My whole programme's falling down around my ears and . . ."

"That's your problem," said Maurice. "And, incidentally, talking of problems. I bumped into your floor manager, Leonard something-or-other, in the loo just now and he was burbling strangely about the Princess of . . ."

"Oh, don't mind him – he's mad," said Andrew.

"We're all mad, otherwise we wouldn't be working in this unnatural business. Mind you, I imagine your Leonard is mad in a different way. He seems to be a fairly straightforward loony, whereas the rest of us are megalomaniacs. And by that I mean people like you and me, who actually appear on the box. For us, the whole of television is simply one vast, demented ego-trip . . ."

"Do you mind?" Andrew said, firmly. "I didn't come here to watch you examining the fluff in your navel. I want Julian Russell back."

Maurice picked up his darts again. "Watch this," he said. "Left ear, tip of nose and one slap in the chops." Having thus nominated his targets he duly achieved them. "I believe I have a natural talent for darts. Do you think I should take it up professionally? There seems to be a lot of money in it these days. The only thing is, I'm not at all sure I could manage all the drinking and smoking that seems to go with it."

"Well?" Andrew said impatiently.

"Well, the short answer is, you can't have him. I've

fixed it all up. He's arranging for me to see his dreadful film and he's promised to bring the pimply bloke to the studio. I'm really looking forward to Friday's programme. With any luck it should be quite excruciatingly boring."

"I don't understand you, Maurice," Andrew said, genuinely puzzled. "I always thought your show was boring by accident but you sound as if you actually *want* it to be boring."

"Of course I do." Maurice peered out into the corridor, shut the door and pulled a chair up close to Andrew's. "This is strictly between you and me, all right? The only way I can see of ever getting out of here is to make *Culture* so relentlessly and teeth-grindingly boring that they'll simply have to take it off the air. It's my escape route, if you like – the equivalent of digging a tunnel in a prisoner-of-war camp."

"But if you succeed," Andrew said. "They'll probably fire you."

"Exactly!" Maurice cried with a triumphant smile. "But, you see, that's what I want. Listen – and this really mustn't proceed beyond these walls – I've been asked by one of the other commercial companies to present a sports programme. Can you imagine? It's just what I've always dreamed of."

"Which company?" Andrew asked, wondering if this philanthropic outfit might have something for him.

Maurice shook his head craftily. "Never you mind, my son. Of course it'll only be a regional thing to start with but the network is definitely interested in the idea, so if it works out . . . Well, anyway, the thing is, and here's the problem, this other company wants me to start work in about three months' time. Great – except that I've still got a year of my contract to go with Nat-Met and Charles Kaufman won't release me. I mean, naturally I haven't told him why I want to leave – I'm not that daft – but I keep telling him how fed up I am with *Culture* and how I want to do something different and he keeps giving me more money to stay on. It's very exasperating. Here am I wanting to get out and I can't break the bloody contract."

"I wish somebody would keep offering me more money to stay," Andrew said.

"Never mind that. The whole business has been driving me mad. So, finally, I hit on the idea that if I made *Culture* really boring - and I don't just mean boring the way all arts programmes on TV are boring but really, truly, monumentally boring, even Kaufman would eventually have to drop it. And I've been working very hard to this end. Haven't you noticed?"

"Well, no, I haven't actually," Andrew said. "To tell you the truth I don't watch it all that often . . ."

"That's the whole fucking trouble!" Maurice yelled, desperately. "Nobody watches! It's unbelievable – I'm turning out the most tedious programme in the entire history of television and nobody has noticed! The only people who watch are a handful of wanking critics who think that if it's boring it must be serious. I'm going out of my mind here! Yesterday . . . I really thought I'd cracked it yesterday. Kaufman called me in. Great, I thought, he's going to fire me. And do you know what he wanted? He wanted to tell me that one of the company directors had seen the review of the show in last Sunday's *Observer* and was very pleased. Pleased! That was close to being the *most* tedious show I've ever done. But this week . . . by God, I think I'll be able to swing it this week, what with Julian Russell and the pimply bloke. I tell you, Andrew, if I don't swing it this week I don't know what I'm going to do."

Andrew drew back a little the better to study the passionate, desperate face thrust so close to his. "So that's the game plan, is it?" he said. "To sabotage your own programme and never mind what happens to the other people who work on it? Maurice, you're a shit."

"Of course I'm a shit," said Maurice. "That's why I can't let you have Julian Russell back – he's my ace. Andrew, tell me – help me – if it doesn't work this week, what am I going to do?"

Andrew stood up, coldly. "That's your problem, Maurice," he said.

When he returned to the production office he found a message from Victoria, who wanted him to call her; and Claudia was back. Briefly, he broke the news of the irretrievable loss of Julian Russell to Meg, who merely said, dispiritedly, "Oh, great." Since Andrew had been away the only piece of information remotely worth considering that had come into the office concerned a man from Croydon who was proposing to roller-skate backwards from Piccadilly, London, to Piccadilly, Manchester, in a sponsored attempt to raise money towards a holiday bus for handicapped homosexuals. The man had agreed to make a live appearance on the programme on Friday, Meg said, but they were still left with the task of filling the main spot in the show, the fifteen-minute interview that came between the commercial break and the end credits.

Andrew left her flicking through a diary of local events and her contact book in search of inspiration and perched himself on the edge of Claudia's desk. "What did Kaufman want?" he said.

"Oh, well, it was a bit odd, really. He said he'd been taking a close interest in me and I'd been doing very well and was I happy in my work. You know – the usual crap. And then he asked me what I really wanted to do in television and I said I'd like to be in front of camera instead of behind it and he nodded a bit and squeezed my thigh and said he had big things in store for me. And that was about it."

"Did he offer to show you his big things?" Andrew asked.

She sighed. "Oh dear."

"Sorry. What I mean is, did he say what big things he had in mind?"

"No. He just smiled and nodded sort of significantly and squeezed my thigh again and said he'd be in touch and I came back here."

"Popular girl, aren't you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Well, Kaufman squeezing your thigh, today, lunch with Mark Payne yesterday."

"Mark squeezed my thigh, too, as a matter of fact." She looked at him levelly. "Are you jealous?"

Andrew laughed scornfully. "Me? Jealous? Hah!" He let the laugh die. It didn't sound as if it deserved to live in any case. "Certainly I'm jealous. Anyway, what did Payne want, apart from a grope?"

"He wants me to work on this new show of his. They're having recruiting meetings and planning sessions all over the place."

"You won't do it, will you?" Andrew asked, anxiously. The thought of Claudia not being there every day when he came into work had quite alarmed him.

"I don't think so. I haven't told him that, though. After all, a girl's got to keep her options open in this business, especially now – the way things are with *Capital Week*. We could end up with only half a programme on Friday." She reached up and stretched luxuriously and Andrew looked with gentle lust at the slim line of her body.

"May I squeeze your thigh, too?" he asked.

"Certainly not. The next man who squeezes my thigh will get a swift knee in the groin."

"Just my luck, isn't it?" he said. "I bet you didn't knee Kaufman in the groin. Or Mark Payne."

"Should have got in earlier, shouldn't you? It's too late now. The thigh-squeezing season is over." And she went back to the typing that he had interrupted.

There was another message from Victoria while Andrew was at lunch – a frugal affair in the pub round the corner. He had wanted Claudia to go with him but she had been summoned, suddenly, to a programme conference with Kaufman and Mark Payne. Meg had gone out early, shopping for steak and various other ingredients for a dinner party that she and her husband were giving that night; the junior producer on the *Capital Week* team was lunching with a publisher and the secretary had gone off with a mob of her peers to scatter Luncheon Vouchers about in some secretarial watering hole. That left only Leonard Wishman as a possible companion and when

Andrew left the office Leonard was on the phone to the Press office at Buckingham Palace trying to find out where the Princess of Wales was.

As he came back from the pub Andrew passed Mark Payne's office. The door was open and through it he could see Mark and Claudia sitting together on a sofa with Kaufman opposite them and various other people, producers and researchers and the like, dotted about the room. Payne and Kaufman were smoking cigars and on the table were the remains of several bottles of wine and three or four plates of sandwiches. Not for the first time that week Andrew had the feeling that important things were going on to which he was not privy. Well, so long as they didn't affect him, he wasn't too bothered.

He ignored Victoria's message, as he had ignored the earlier one. He knew what it was about, of course; she was going to upbraid him bitterly again for letting her down on the Julian Russell interview and he couldn't face that. He sat for a while in his own cubicle, wondering how they were going to fill the interview spot and after a few minutes he heard Meg come back to the production office, and then Claudia, but neither of them interrupted him and he was beginning to doze off when the junior producer, a twenty-three-year-old Oxford graduate – not more than a trainee really – returned ebulliently from a well-lubricated lunch with the publisher to announce that he had got the very thing for Friday's interview.

Andrew came swiftly to full consciousness and hurried into the production office where Tim, the junior producer, was brandishing a book. Andrew snatched it from him. On the dust jacket was a picture of an extremely well-built woman in bra and bikini pants cavorting about on a stage. The jacket was yellow with the title – *And They All Cried, 'Drop 'Em!'* – in scarlet. At the bottom in bold black type it said: "The True Confessions of AIMEE AMOURA, London's Naughtiest Stripper".

"If you want her, you can have her," said Tim, who was slightly drunk, being new to the business and unused to publishers' lunches. "See, the book's not actually published till Monday but . . . but . . . BUT . . . the

publishers say we can have Aimée in the studio for an interview on Friday."

"She looks a right old slag," said Andrew doubtfully.

"Cer'nly she's a slag," said Tim. "'Assa beauty of it. Right. A'solutely. Aimée Amoura, London's Nastiest . . . no, no, scrub that, London's Naughties' Stripper tells all – on *Capital Week*. Scoop – right? Right? Right!" And he sat down abruptly in the nearest chair.

"It's not a bad idea," Meg said. "A stripper who's written a book. You can't call that bland. Well done, Tim. Okay, *à nos moutons, mes braves*. Tim, you . . . no, on second thoughts not you, Tim . . . Claudia, make the arrangements with the publisher and . . ."

"Gladys," Tim said. "Aimée to you, Gladys to her friends. A very nice lady, ol' Gladys. She was very nice to me at lunch. Very, very, very nice to me . . ."

Andrew said: "Hang on. Are we absolutely sure about this? I mean, a stripper . . ."

"Yes," Meg said. "We're absolutely sure, on account of everything else has collapsed around our ears and anyway it ought to make the punters sit up and take notice over their baked beans on toast. So you go and read the book, Andrew, and leave the grown-up stuff to us. Off you go."

And off he went to spend the afternoon reading the true confessions of Aimée Amoura. The book was very badly written having clearly been ghosted by someone who had learned his writer's craft at the *Sun* or *Daily Star* School of Literature but against that it was, he noted with some relief, only mildly pornographic. Miss Amoura – or Gladys to her friends – seemed to have spent a sizeable chunk of her life fighting off amorous advances in damp-smelling basement clubs or repelling threatened invasions of the stage by drunks – just as she was doing interesting things with snakes, or forgetting to put her knickers on so that her act came untimely to its climax, as it were. But apart from occasional descriptions of men who had carelessly failed to adjust their dress before accosting her and the odd mention of fumbling fingers attempting to rip the thin silk – or, more

probably, the thin manmade fibre – from . . . there was nothing too explicitly sexual. With a bit of luck, Andrew reckoned, Aimée Amoura should provide a spicy interview without inciting sub-teenagers to start tearing the clothes off other sub-teenagers around the capital's tea-tables.

He was comfortably into the book when Victoria phoned him and this time there was no escape.

"Andrew?" she said.

"Er . . . yes," he replied having toyed with and then abandoned the notion of saying "Not necessarily".

"Whatever you're doing at lunchtime tomorrow, drop it," she said. "Because you're having lunch with me. I positively insist."

"What?" he said, amazed. He had expected her to be cross but, on the contrary, she was purring with friendliness.

"My way of saying thank you, darling," she said. "Julian's absolutely thrilled at being on *Culture*. It's his very favourite programme. He and the film and that critic are going to have the whole show to themselves and it's all thanks to you. Well, actually Julian doesn't know that. He thinks I fixed it and he's delighted and the company's delighted because he's delighted and I'm the flavour of the month and I absolutely insist that you let me buy you lunch tomorrow."

"Didn't he mind, though, that I'd dropped him from *Capital Week*?" Andrew asked.

"What? Oh, no. Well, as a matter of fact, he doesn't know you dropped him. He thinks I rescued him."

"Rescued him? What do you mean – rescued him?"

"Well, he reckons *Capital Week*'s a bit down market for him and anyway he didn't take to you very much, so it's all worked out beautifully, hasn't it?"

"Yes," Andrew said, indignantly. "Oh, yes. Terrific. I hope nobody watches *Culture* this week – not even Maurice's mum."

"I don't suppose anybody will but so long as dear Julian's happy, what do we care? Lunch then? Tomorrow?"

Andrew, whose paramount emotion was relief that she was no longer angry with him, agreed.

It was difficult for Andrew to escape from television that day because when he got home he found the place occupied by Oliver Lloyd and his TV crew, all dusty from the dig. Laura, equally dusty, was pouring them drinks and passing peanuts and sandwiches around. The crew greeted Andrew perfunctorily and at once returned to the more serious business of working out how much overtime they should charge for the onerous task, over and above the call of duty, of accompanying Oliver to Andrew's house, there to consume his food and booze.

Oliver's assistant, a conscientious girl, was trying to persuade them that they should not charge overtime at all, on the grounds that they were now off-duty; to which they replied that they were not off-duty until they got back to base. Since all the brothers regarded this as an unanswerable argument it seemed to Andrew that he would very probably have them lolling about his home until long after midnight, clocking up well-earned overtime.

"There's a box of white wine in the fridge," Laura said. "You'd better get it opened, I think. A party seems to be developing."

Andrew went into the kitchen to do as he was instructed and Oliver followed him in. "Did you enjoy yourself at the opera last night?" Andrew asked.

Oliver shuffled around uncomfortably. "That's what I wanted to talk to you about. That woman's a menace."

"Old Caroline? She's all right."

"She is not all right," Oliver said. It seemed to Andrew that he was blushing beneath the dust. "Do you know, she . . . she tried to seduce me."

"In the Royal Opera House? Surely not."

"No, not there - later. I've never been so shocked in my life. We . . . we had a meal after the show – she insisted on paying; said Charles would charge it to

expenses – and then I took her home and . . . and, well, she just pounced on me."

"Where?" Andrew asked with interest.

"Right there in the hall. We'd hardly closed the front door before she was upon me . . ." He paused, suspiciously. "Why did you ask that?"

"Just wanted to get the picture clear in my mind," Andrew said, tapping his temple with a forefinger. "Did you put up a good fight?"

"Well, of course I did. She's the wife of a friend, after all. I . . . I expostulated most strongly."

"Good tactic that – expostulation. Throws 'em every time."

Oliver helped himself to a tumbler of wine from the newly-opened box. "Do you know," he said, shuddering reminiscently, "she very nearly succeeded."

"Rape easy, do you, Oliver?"

"Do be serious. It's an extremely tricky situation. I mean, how does one cope with it? I mean, there one is – in the woman's house with her climbing all over one. One can hardly hurl her off and run."

"You could always make an excuse and leave," Andrew said. "That's what *News of the World* reporters used to do in the good old days. Or at least, so they said. How did you escape in the end?"

"Well, fortunately, Charles came home a good deal earlier than expected. I've never been so glad to see anyone in my life."

Andrew had to admit to a feeling of disappointment. In a way that was not entirely logical he felt that a successful seduction of Oliver by Caroline would have alleviated his own sense of guilt. He said: "I bet Laura laughed when you told her about it."

Oliver was horrified. "Good God, I haven't told Laura. You . . . you won't tell her, will you? Please, I implore you."

"Why not?"

"Well . . ." Oliver suffered a moment's confusion. "Well, I don't want you to tell anyone. Good Lord, this isn't the kind of thing one wants bruited about."

"Why did you tell me then?"

"That's what I was coming to. It was something you said last night about 'après-opera'. I know you've taken Caroline out a few times because she told me so – though I must say she didn't speak of you with any great warmth – and I wondered if you'd suffered a similar experience." He was studying Andrew closely.

"Me?" Andrew said. "Why should Caroline Kaufman make a pass at me? I'm just one of her old man's hired helps. I'm not famous like you."

"You're *quite* famous," Oliver said, a shade patronisingly. "But I see what you mean. You think she's a . . . a . . ."

"A star-fucker," Andrew said, nodding. "Quite possibly. Oh, by the way, you didn't happen to see a man with an artificial leg hanging about her house, did you? He could have been bald or wearing a wig."

"No. I'm quite certain there was nobody like that around. I could hardly have missed him if there was."

"Pity," Andrew said and took the wine box into the other room where he discovered that his father-in-law was now among those present. McCulper was engaged in conversation with the technicians who, having worked out their overtime to their own complete satisfaction, were now prepared to socialise, on the strict understanding of course that everyone realised they were still working.

"Interesting life these fellows lead," McCulper said, summoning Andrew to join him. "Not like that Fred Karno outfit of yours. If you're going to work in television, why don't you do something worthwhile, like Oliver?"

The technicians, adopting the expressions of men who led interesting lives and did worthwhile things, nodded solemn agreement. "Still," said the cameraman kindly, remembering a guest's obligation of courtesy to his host, "we all have to start somewhere, Andy." Andrew, who hated to be called Andy, was not greatly consoled.

McCulper took him to one side. "Just been down to

the pavilion to see your team-sheet for Saturday. What a shambles! I see Phil Potts has dropped out."

"Yes. Er . . . urgent family business, I'm afraid."

"Rubbish. I'm told his wife won't let him play." McCulper laughed heartily. "What a spineless lot you are to be sure." It was unthinkable to McCulper that any man should be told what to do by a mere wife. "And that fellow Dermot you've got in his place, fellow with ears like soup plates – he can't play. Hopeless, he is."

"We'll win this year," Andrew said with a great deal more conviction than he felt.

"Well, at least you'll come second."

"Who . . . er, who've you got in your side?" Andrew asked, as casually as he could.

McCulper winked. "Just you wait and see, my lad. I've got a couple of surprises in store for you."

Across the room Laura was in deep conversation with Oliver and his assistant. McCulper went across to join them. The cameraman was instructing his own assistant to stop drinking immediately on the grounds that he had to drive the car back to London. The assistant did not take kindly to this idea, demanding to know why it was always he who had to do the driving while the cameraman drank for both of them and the cameraman explained that it was all a matter of seniority. The rest of the crew were demolishing two heaped plates of sandwiches and helping themselves liberally to the box of wine. Andrew found himself feeling alone and lonely in his own home.

Much later that night as they lay in bed – twin beds – reading, Andrew said: "Are you happy, Laura?"

For a moment, surprisingly, she looked guilty. "What do you mean?"

"Well . . . I don't know. We just seem to be drifting along at the moment. We've hardly even spoken to each other for days. And we're never alone together."

"And what does *that* mean?"

"Well, tonight for instance – the house full of television people being sick all over the place . . ."

"It was only the electrician! And he was very nice about it. He did his best to clear it up."

"He got it all over the lavatory wall."

"Well, poor man, he was taken ill."

"Taken drunk, you mean."

"No. It was the wine, that wine in the box. He said it had upset his stomach because it wasn't the quality he was used to. It is pretty fearful stuff, you must admit. God knows why you bought it in the first . . ."

"Anyway, that's not the point. Even when we haven't got TV crews vomiting everywhere, we're not alone together. You're either with your father or your father's with us . . ."

She sat up aggressively in bed. "Ah, I knew we were getting round to Daddy. It's always the same, isn't it? Poor Daddy gets blamed for everything."

"All right, all right," Andrew said, placatingly. "I'm sorry I mentioned your father. We'll leave your father out of it. Forget your father. What about all the time you spend at the dig with Oliver?"

Laura moved firmly onto the attack. "Oh yes? I notice you don't mention the interminable hours you spend playing cricket, or going to films in the morning and not getting back till the evening, or being conveniently out of your office when I invite you to cocktail parties, or . . ."

Andrew sighed. "Okay, I give in. The fact remains that, whatever the reasons, we're just drifting along at the moment. That's all I'm really trying to say."

They were both quiet for a while after that. Then Laura said: "It's just a phase. I expect all married couples go through them. Don't worry about it, Andrew – it'll be all right." And then she switched off her reading light. "Goodnight," she said.

Andrew switched off his own light and sat in the darkness, staring out of the window at the distant, floodlit church. He still felt lonely.

8

Henry phoned the following morning, requesting another lift into Town. No, he said, he wasn't hitting the high spots with Sue again; this time it was an office piss-up for someone who was leaving and, since he had no desire to be stopped in the late hours of the night by a couple of officers requesting him to "kindly breathe into this little bag, sir," he was arranging for the *Daily Journal* to provide him with transport home. It was, he said, one of the few perks attached to being an executive. Andrew offered the lift gladly and, while he was doing so, Laura kissed him briskly on the cheek and exited, stage left, looking businesslike and glamorous. It was one of her days for working at Daddy's office.

On the way to London Henry enquired about the incidence of men with artificial legs and/or beards in Andrew's life yesterday and Andrew assured him that, as far as he was aware, there had been a total absence of same. Then they chatted casually about the kind of day that lay ahead of each of them and Andrew said that his appeared to be shaping up rather quietly.

"Nothing much on at all, really," he added, "except a lunch date with a girl."

"Claire?" Henry said, showing a fine grasp of Andrew's affairs, "or Caroline?"

"Well, neither actually. It's Victoria."

"Ah," Henry said, surveying the road ahead thoughtfully for a moment or two. "I'm finding it rather difficult to keep up with you and your extra-marital relationships, Andrew. Do other people have the same trouble?"

"No, no. You misunderstand – this is simply a business thing. She's a publicity girl."

"Pretty?"

"Very."

"Aha!"

"No, not 'aha!'," Andrew said. "I've known her for ages and there's been nothing like that."

"But do you fancy her?"

"Well, yes. But then I fancy nearly all women. It doesn't necessarily mean that I . . ."

"Does she fancy you?"

"Well . . . yes, I think she does actually but . . ."

"Then I say again, 'Aha!'," said Henry.

"Look, we're having lunch together. In a restaurant. What can possibly happen in a restaurant?"

"You might well have asked, some months ago, what could possibly happen at *Turandot* and that would have been a very reasonable question to which the answer, 'Well, you end up humping your companion across her own kitchen table or wherever' was not necessarily the one that sprang first to mind. But nevertheless that's what happened."

"Yes, but . . ."

"I confess you puzzle me, Andrew," Henry said. "All this frenetic sexual activity, I mean. You strike me as being a bit young to be going through the change of life or the male menopause."

"It's nothing to do with that," Andrew said. "It's just that all of a sudden – mostly in the last few days it seems to me – women have discovered my Achilles' heel, which happens to be women. And they're exploiting it ruthlessly."

He had thought about this for some time last night as he lay in bed looking out of the window and now he tried to explain his conclusions to Henry. He had always been fond of women as, it seemed, they were fond of him; but he had never been a chaser, rather had he been chased.

"I just like them," he said, "and they appear to like the fact that I like them."

Henry was not convinced by any of this. "You're just a philanderer, face it," he said, sceptically.

"No, I'm not." He had looked it up once in the *Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* and had never forgotten the definition. "If you mean it in the 1813 sense, i.e. 'a lover; one given to making love' then you may have a point because that was certainly true in my single days. But if you mean it in the other, more pejorative sense, 'a dangler after women or one who makes love in a trifling manner' or simply, as the word has been interpreted since 1841, 'a male flirt' then you're wrong. Well, I may be a flirt, I'll admit that. But I'm no trifler."

Henry, unimpressed by this erudition, said: "I shouldn't think you dangle a lot either, do you? I mean, if you'd been simply lying there dangling all the time you wouldn't have been a lot of use to Claire or Caroline or . . ."

"Do you mind? This is serious. I'm very worried about myself, about the way I can't seem to say No once they've got me cornered. All my will-power seems to disappear. Are other men like that? I mean, are you like that?"

"No, I'm not. I like to flirt with a woman when the opportunity arises but I don't actually feel that my day has been destroyed unless I can get my leg across her. You know your trouble? Satyriasis."

Andrew had looked that up, too, in the *Shorter O.E.D.* "No, it's not. Not if by that you mean 'excessively great sexual desire in the male'. Nor, in case you were going to throw that in, am I victim of priapism." He knew about priapism because it had been cross-referenced under satyriasis. "I don't practise licentiousness or intentional indecency, nor do I have a persistent erection of the penis. As a matter of fact my sexual desire is very swiftly satisfied, rather too swiftly if some of the adverse reviews I've had in my time are anything to go by. I may be a womaniser in the sense that since *Turandot* I've been consorting illicitly with women but not in the sense that I go illicitly after women. They go after me. They do, honestly, and in certain circumstances I just can't turn them down because I can't bear to make them unhappy."

"Crap," Henry said. There seemed to be no satisfactory rejoinder to this and they were silent for a while as they came off the motorway and joined the slow-moving traffic

on its way into central London. Then Henry said: "Where does Laura fit into all this?"

"That's what I'm wondering," Andrew said. There had been many reasons why he and Laura had married: they had both been young, mutually attracted, working together, embarking on what looked to be promising and lucrative careers in advertising. The future had appeared bright, even exciting, and marriage had seemed a good idea at the time. Even McCulper's opposition had only strengthened Laura's determination. Indeed, as he looked back more coolly, more dispassionately later on, it seemed to Andrew that it may well have been the very fact of McCulper's opposition that gave her the determination to get married in the first place. For it seemed to him that she had been going through a brief, too brief, period of rebellion against her father at that time and after he had brought her once more to heel the marriage had never been quite so secure or so close. By then in any case Laura was expecting the twins and she had never really forgiven Andrew for making her pregnant so soon after the wedding.

"If it's not too personal a question," Henry said, "well, actually it is a very personal question and I'll understand if you choose not to answer it, but are you in love with Laura?"

"I'm not really sure any more," Andrew said. "I think I'm in love with someone else."

"Oh. Who? Claire, Caroline, Victoria . . . ?"

"No," Andrew said. "Claudia."

"Jesus Christ," said Henry. "I give up."

As he strode into the production office eager to start a day's work that did not look as if it would consist of much more than finishing Aimée Amoura's book and going out to lunch with Victoria, Andrew had his now customary morning encounter with Leonard Wishman. But today it was a different Leonard Wishman. Gone was the surly, truculent Leonard Wishman of yore and in his place there had arisen a bright, almost feverish

Leonard Wishman, one with an eager glint in his eye and an unaccustomed readiness to pass the time of day. For a start he said "Good morning, Andrew", which was a distinct improvement on "Leave me alone", to say nothing of "Fuck off". He was at his desk in the otherwise empty room, busy writing.

"I'm taking the plunge today," he said. "I'm going to reveal myself at last."

"Who to?" Andrew asked, absent-mindedly, as he flicked through his mail – the usual assortment of publicity handouts, many of them with his name spelt wrong, and invitations to exhibitions by unknown artists at unknown galleries and obscure concerts in dark, probably unexplored, corners of remote suburbs. There were also two letters from people who had started collections of the autographs of famous people and, generously stretching the definition a bit, demanded signed photographs of Andrew. The last letter was anonymous and written in green ink by someone who had presumably gripped the pen with both hands. It was copiously underlined and spattered with exclamation marks and it began: "You stupid great prick!!!" Andrew decided to stop reading it before it became rude and threw it in the wastepaper basket.

"The Princess, of course," Leonard said. "See, up to now she's never really known who I am. I mean, she knows my name, naturally, and where I live but otherwise I've been a man of mystery to her, just sort of hinting at the kind of person I am and the work I do. I thought that would intrigue her."

"Did it?" Andrew asked, interested.

"Well, I think I must have overdone it because I haven't had an answer to my last six letters. So now I'm coming out into the open, telling her all about myself. I'm writing on the office paper, you see, so she'll know it's genuine. And then I'm asking her to come and live with me."

"You're what?" said Andrew.

"Asking her to come and live with me. It's time she made up her mind between me and . . . him. So now I'm offering her a home."

"You reckon she'd fancy that, do you?" Andrew said. "A maisonette in Crouch End?"

"I can offer her love, adoration and a home that's newly decorated and fully equipped with built-in wardrobes. I made them myself. What more could she want?"

"Well, for openers a charge account at Harrods, I should imagine." Andrew sat down in the chair opposite Leonard's and stared at him earnestly. "Do you really think this is a good idea, Leonard?" he asked, trying to humour him. "I mean, you're older than the Prince."

"Three inches taller, though," Leonard said. "Besides, I've thought about this very carefully and I reckon I'm a much better prospect than he is. I'm a man of the world while he's led a sheltered life."

"I don't know. He plays polo, he's been in all three armed services, does impersonations of the Goons – I wouldn't call that a sheltered life. In any case, do you think it's altogether wise to write to her on Nat-Met paper? What if the letter fell into the wrong hands? You could get into trouble."

"What sort of trouble? Do you think he might sue me for alienating his wife's affections? I shouldn't mind that."

"No, Leonard, I wasn't really thinking . . ."

Leonard took his letter out of the typewriter and read it through while Andrew watched him anxiously, not quite sure what to do or how to handle the situation. Leonard wrote "your adoring Leonard" at the bottom of the page and added three kisses. "Well, it's too late now," he said. "I've done it. I've made my mind up."

"Look at it this way, Leonard," Andrew said, trying another tack. "Will she really want to give up being the Princess of Wales to become the uncrowned Queen of Crouch End?"

"We won't live in Crouch End for ever. There's a three-bedroomed house in Finchley I've got my eye on." He sealed the letter in an envelope, put a stamp on it and wrote "Strictly Personal and Confidential" across the top. "There – that should make sure nobody else opens it."

"You might have put a first-class stamp on it," Andrew said. "She won't get it for ages."

"I'm in no hurry. This'll give her time for consideration. I want her to be quite sure before she comes to me."

Andrew was just wondering how the Princess could be expected to consider a proposition while it was still in the post on its way to her when Leonard said: "You're trying to spoil it, aren't you?" The closed, suspicious look had returned to his face. "Well, I'm not going to let you. You're just jealous, that's all." And he went out to post his letter personally, unwilling to entrust it to the internal mail service.

He had barely departed before Meg came in.

"Leonard's finally flipped," Andrew said. "He's just written to the Princess of Wales asking her to come and live with him."

"No chance," Meg said, firmly.

Andrew said, yelping somewhat: "I know he's got no chance! That's not the point. The poor devil's blown his lid. We ought to do something."

Meg was sorting energetically through the papers on her desk. "Oh, Leonard's harmless. And anyway whatever you do, don't you dare do it until after the programme tomorrow. He's the best floor manager in the outfit and we need him, so don't you go messing things up."

"Look, I'm worried about him."

"Nonsense. I told you – she probably gets millions of cranky letters like that. Don't fuss so." Meg found whatever it was she was looking for and gave a little grunt of relief. "It would be fun though, wouldn't it?"

"What would?"

"If she really did run away with him. Do you think we could persuade him to do it on a Friday afternoon so we could be first with the news? What a scoop! Even old Kaufman couldn't call that bland."

"Oh, shut up," Andrew said. Meg went away, chuckling, and Andrew removed himself to his own cubicle, there to finish reading the memoirs of Aimée Amoura.

With the exception of an episode in which a Middle-Eastern oil sheikh offered her £10,000 to let him cover her

body with strawberries and cream, which he proposed to remove without the aid of a spoon, the book became a little tame towards the end, as the author fell to philosophising about the role of the stripper in modern society. Apart from the fact that strippers enabled sad, lonely men to fulfil their fantasies without pressing probably unwelcome attentions on other, less extrovert, women Miss Amoura couldn't seem to argue that they had too important a role, though she was firmly of the opinion that modern society would be the poorer without them.

All in all, Andrew felt that, so long as he was very careful in his line of questioning, Aimée Amoura should provide a welcome injection of jollity. He went out to lunch feeling much happier about this week's programme: at least it should reflect some of the more off-beat aspects of London life. Preoccupied with such thoughts he failed to notice the city businessman with the bowler hat, the Guards' moustache, the pin-striped suit and the M.C.C. tie waiting patiently across the road in a Ford Escort with a "Disabled Driver" sticker on the window. Nor was he aware, as he drove away, that the Ford Escort was following him.

Victoria had booked a table at an intimate little bistro in the St John's Wood area and she and Andrew sat opposite each other in a tiny cubicle at the back, their knees touching. The contact made Andrew uneasy, because he liked it, but, the available space being so limited, he was unable to avoid touching her without contorting his legs in such a way as to run the risk of severe cramp in his right thigh. In the end he returned his legs to the position in which they had started, with his knees pressed against hers, and pretended, as she seemed to be pretending, that no such contact had been made. This was not easy for Andrew because it was a warm, sunny day and Victoria was provocatively clad in a pale summer dress of some silky material. It was cut quite low in the front and, as far as he could tell, she was suntanned all over. She had greeted him when he arrived with a kiss and though he had tried to take it on the cheek he had reacted too slowly and somehow she had contrived to

wrap her mouth round his lower lip in a salutation which, because of his manoeuvres, had probably turned out to be more intimate than she had intended. He could still, disturbingly, taste her lipstick.

So, as the avocado with prawns was followed by the sole meunière and Victoria recklessly ordered another bottle of Muscadet to follow the first, which already stood upside down in its ice bucket, Andrew was aware of the subtle, and admittedly delicious, crackle of sexual electricity. There had always been this sort of spark between him and Victoria, which was why he had struggled for so long to avoid being alone with her, but today it was sharper and more vibrant than ever. The unavoidable knee contact and the lipstick taste had much to do with it, of course, but his feeling of excitement was not at all lessened by her habit, apparently casual and unpremeditated, of feeding him titbits from his own plate as well as hers with her fingers. They were small, slim fingers with elegantly manicured nails and every time she popped a prawn or some such into his mouth she also managed to stroke his cheek. By the time they had finished the sole and the second bottle was half empty Andrew was in a state of much confusion, largely because Victoria seemed quite unaware of what she was doing and the effect it was having.

It was warm and cramped in the booth and, as the strawberries and cream were placed before him, Andrew shifted a little uncomfortably in his seat. In the brief moment that his knees were apart her left leg had insinuated itself between them. He spread his knees wider to stop this even more intimate contact but the leg followed him, rubbing itself very softly against his right calf. He cleared his throat preparatory to instructing her to stop it at once but she was gazing at him with big, dark eyes and talking animatedly about the frightful Julian Russell and his obnoxious film and she looked so eager and innocent that he began to wonder whether the part of her body that was concealed beneath the table was leading a totally independent life of its own.

By the time the second bottle was finished his right leg was trapped between both of hers and she was feeding him strawberries with her fingers while prattling on about films and television and how much Julian Russell was looking forward to his interview with Maurice Bowles the next day. Andrew was hardly able to take this in for he was slightly but delightfully giddy from the wine and the soft pressure of her knees against his thigh.

She did not order coffee but called instead for the bill and when it came she said: "Andrew, this has been absolutely lovely. I can't imagine why we haven't done it before."

"Done what?" Andrew said, hoarsely, his thoughts centred somewhere in the region of the top of his right leg.

"Had lunch together, of course." She looked at her watch and Andrew, conscious though he was of the dangers inherent in his present wine-lulled, sexually-stimulated condition, was yet aware of a stab of disappointment that this most agreeable interlude was over. "Did you enjoy it?"

He nodded. "I can't think when I've enjoyed lunch more."

"Good, because I'm going to ask you a favour. I have to pick up some papers from home. Would you give me a lift? It's only about five minutes from here." In the circumstances he could hardly refuse and, in truth, he didn't want to.

Victoria lived in a narrow, three-storey, terraced house in one of the slightly less fashionable parts of Swiss Cottage. "Come on in," she said. "Have a look at the place. I'll only be a minute or two." So he followed her into a light, airy hall and from there to a small, white, elegant sitting-room where she said: "Hey, we didn't have any coffee. What can I have been thinking about!"

"Well, it doesn't matter. I . . ."

"No, no, don't be silly. We'll have it here. No, I insist. A coffee and a brandy, right? Come and help me." Meekly, he traipsed behind her into a neat, modern kitchen where, in the course of making coffee and pouring

cognac, she brushed against him several times, thus swiftly returning him to the mood of troubled excitement that had been on him in the restaurant.

He carried the laden tray into the sitting-room where, on her instructions, he set it down on a low table and, still on her instructions, sat beside her on a two-seater sofa. She wriggled around sideways, one knee up on the cushion between them, her skirt hitched high on her leg. Andrew tried not to look.

"Cheers," she said, sipping brandy. And then: "You're a very naughty boy, Andrew."

He found himself blushing. Oh God, he thought – all that leg contact: she thinks I was doing it deliberately.

"You were very naughty with my friend Claire," she said.

He was horrified. "Good God," he said. "You know about that? Is nothing sacred these days?"

"Not between best friends it isn't. I'm really rather angry with you and extremely hurt. Five minutes you'd known Claire before you were in bed with her. But you've known me for simply ages and until you started playing footsie with me at lunch you've never so much as laid a glove on me."

"I wasn't playing footsie with you!" he said.

"Yes, you were. I'm not complaining, mind. I liked it, too – especially when you started pressing your thigh against my knee."

"I did not! I didn't!"

"Shush." She put her glass down on the table and then, quite simply, pounced on him. He fell back against the arm of the sofa, her mouth clamped against his, and found himself staring over her shoulder at a photograph of the most fearsome looking man he had ever seen. It was only a head and shoulders shot but it gave the impression of great size and brute strength. The expression on the face may very possibly have started out to be a smile but to Andrew it was more like a scowl or even a snarl. The eyes were small and fierce and close-set, the nose broken, the chin square and belligerent and, like the cheeks, dark with incipient beard, even though the

face was apparently clean-shaven. A mop of thick, black, curly hair fell almost into the eyes.

"Dear God," Andrew said. "What's that?"

"Mmmm?" Victoria slipped her hand into his now open shirt and glanced up at the photograph. "Oh, that's just the Animal."

"I can see that," Andrew said, staring hypnotised at the photograph which seemed to be staring back at him with murderous hatred. "But what kind of animal is it?"

"My husband," Victoria said picking up the picture fondly. "His name's David but I always call him the Animal. It seems to suit him somehow."

"Your husband? I didn't know you had a husband. He's not . . . Christ, he's not likely to come barging in here, is he?"

She put the photograph down and snuggled against him again. "No, silly. He's in Hong Kong. He won't be back till the weekend."

Relieved but still uneasy Andrew continued to study the picture. "Big . . . big fellow, is he?"

She began to nibble the soft skin on his neck. "Oh, yes. Six foot three, fifteen and a half stone. He plays in the pack for the Wasps. Well, he did until the end of last season but then he got sent off for butting the referee. Actually it was the linesman who sent him off because the referee was unconscious. The Animal had to carry him to the first aid room. He was awfully sweet about it – the Animal, I mean. The referee wasn't sweet at all. When he came round after the game they had to talk him out of sending for the police and laying charges of assault. He was very unsporting about the whole thing."

It was, of course, only an illusion but for a moment it was as though the snarl on the Animal's lips had become even more vicious.

"Why does he wear his hair low like that?" Andrew asked.

"He has to, poor darling. It starts growing just above his eyebrows. I think they'd run out of foreheads when they made him."

"Do you know," Andrew said, "if I were a woman

I'd want to hear him speak before I went to bed with him."

"Oh, I did. I insisted on him speaking. I said, 'Say please, Animal' and he did. Well, it sounded quite like 'please' so I gave him the benefit of the doubt." Lying there close against Andrew she craned her neck to bestow another affectionate smile on the unlovely photograph. "And then afterwards, when he said 'thank you' quite clearly, just like a real human being, I decided I'd better marry him. Mind you, when we went to bed that first time I was hoping it would be like the princess and the frog – you know, that afterwards he'd turn into a handsome prince. But he didn't. He was still the same old Animal." She blew the picture a kiss and ran her fingertips lightly up Andrew's chest. "He's not very bright, poor love, but fortunately it doesn't really matter because his father and his brothers are very clever and they sort of keep him in the family business for laughs. That's why he's in Hong Kong. They took him along on a business trip. I think they find him awfully handy for carrying the luggage."

Andrew squinted at the beauty who was chewing his lips and then at the beast in the picture. "Why did you marry him?"

She looked up, surprised. "Because I love him, of course."

"But . . . but if that's so, what are you doing here with me?"

Victoria sighed. "This is sex. It's got nothing to do with love. Look, do you read Raymond Chandler? Well, do you remember that bit – I think it's in *The Lady in the Lake* – where the man says that sometimes you want to feel a leg, another leg? Well, women are like that, too. And right now, much as I love the Animal, I want to feel a leg; I want to feel your leg, so let's go upstairs where I can do it in comfort."

And so saying she took him by the hand and led him to the door. The Animal's small, black eyes followed him malevolently right across the room.

The bedroom to which she took him was on the top

floor, an obvious guest-room with a double bed and a bathroom en suite. "Come on, get 'em off," Victoria said briskly and at once removed her own dress to reveal black lace underwear that had surely come as part of some seductress's survival kit. Andrew undressed more slowly. The shock of the photograph downstairs had done nothing to increase his ardour and with the effect of the wine wearing off and leaving him slightly hung over he really didn't want to go through with this enterprise. He was, he realised, trapped again: cornered by a woman who wanted him and whom he could not now refuse without mortally offending her.

Victoria, still in her underwear, lay on the bed watching him. "Was it good?" she said. "With Claire?"

"I don't like to talk about things like that," he said, gruffly.

"That's nice. She seemed quite happy."

He peeled off his socks and threw them onto a chair. "To tell you the truth I still don't know how it all happened. She just, I don't know, she just sort of threw herself at me."

"And you caught her like the good little cricketer you are. Well, if you want to know what it was all about, I'll tell you – she was mad at her boyfriend and whipping you into bed made her feel better."

"Oh, thanks," Andrew said. "A sort of substitute for a couple of aspirins, was I?"

"Well, she did fancy you, too, if that's any consolation. And now, if you don't mind, we'll stop talking about Claire while you concentrate on me." And she pulled him to her on the bed and began to kiss him fiercely. Andrew was just beginning to think that a certain amount of pleasure might, after all, be derived from this generally deplorable situation when a noise from below caught his attention. He stopped what he was doing at the time and listened.

"What's that?" he said.

"Hmm?" she murmured languorously, "What's what?"

"A noise. Listen . . . Can't you hear it? There's something grunting downstairs."

They both sat up, listening. "There," Andrew said. "There it is again."

"Oh, my God!" said Victoria. "It's the Animal!"

And now the grunting noises, coming closer up the stairs, converted themselves into intelligible speech, the hoarse bass speech of a rugby player who had been tackled too often around the larynx. "Victoria? Where are you, Victoria?"

"He'll kill me," Andrew said, panicking. "What am I going to do? He'll kill me."

Victoria was off the bed, gathering his clothes, hurling them into the bathroom, shoving him in after them. "Get in there," she whispered urgently. "Stay in there. Lock the door. And, whatever you do, don't make a sound."

He had barely shut and locked the door and leaned, trembling with fear, against it when he heard the Animal come into the bedroom.

"Animal!" Victoria said. "Darling! How . . . how lovely. I didn't expect you until . . . What are you doing home so early?"

The deep, terrifying voice said: "Got fed up with Hong Kong. Hot. Thought I'd come home. What are you dressed like that for?"

"Well, I . . . I was going to have a nap."

"In the guest-room? Why in the guest-room? What's wrong with our room?"

"I . . . I can't sleep in our room when you're away, darling. I get . . . I get lonely because I miss you." Andrew thought she was handling the situation very well. All that was needed now was for her to get her husband out of that room and into another room with the door shut so that Andrew could creep down the stairs and . . . Suddenly the heard but unseen events in the guest-bedroom took a new turn, as Victoria said: "Animal? Animal! What are you doing?"

"Thought I'd take a little nap with you." And the Animal laughed. To Andrew it sounded like the kind of laugh the ogre might have uttered either shortly before or immediately after saying "Fe, fi, fo, fum!"

"Animal! Stop it! Animal! Tell me . . . tell me about Hong Kong."

"Already told you. Hot."

"Animal, please! Not here."

"Why not?"

"Let's . . . let's go to our own room, now you're home." Good idea, Andrew thought; great idea.

"Waste of time," said the Animal. There was a sudden squeal from Victoria followed by the sound of bodies falling onto a bed. Then came the squeak of bedsprings being brought energetically into action and more squeals and giggles from Victoria and dreadful, feral noises from the Animal. Under the cover of this cacophony Andrew began slowly, carefully to dress himself. By the time he had finished there was silence in the bedroom but it only seemed to last a minute or two before the bed springs and the Animal began tuning up for an encore. Andrew sat on the lavatory seat and stared wretchedly down the plughole of the bath. He couldn't remember when he had ever felt so miserable or so frightened in his life.

Time passed – fairly swiftly no doubt for the couple in the bedroom but very slowly indeed for Andrew. Then, after what seemed like hours, he heard Victoria say: "Gosh, Animal, I'd completely forgotten – there are people coming for dinner tonight and I haven't started preparing anything yet."

"Put 'em off," growled the Animal, sleepily.

"No, I can't. It's far too late. I'll tell you what – come and help me get everything ready."

"Too sleepy. Take a nap."

"All right, well, take it in our room."

"No. Rather stay here. Nice here. Sheets smell of you."

"They smell of me in our room, too, Animal. Please." But the only reply was a snore. Andrew heard Victoria murmur, "Oh dear, oh, dear God, I don't know what to do," and then she left the room. More time passed. The Animal snored on, regularly, noisily. Andrew stayed where he was on the lavatory and, for want of anything better to do, polished his shoes on the bath mat. As far as he could see he was doomed to spend the rest of his life

in this bathroom and if the Animal found him there the rest of his life wouldn't be very long.

After a while Victoria returned to the bedroom and he heard her tiptoeing stealthily towards the bathroom door. But just as she reached it the Animal woke up. "Wha . . .? Wha . . .? Whosser?" he said.

"Nothing, darling. It's all right." She went out again.

So the afternoon wore on. Twice more Victoria came back and twice more the Animal woke up before she could rescue Andrew and then drifted off back to sleep again. But on this second occasion she refused to let him slumber.

"Animal," she said, sharply. "Animal, you must get up now. It's half-past six. We've got people coming soon. You must get up and get dressed."

Finally the message got through. The bed gave another creak as the Animal sat up, yawning and grunting. "Think I'll have a shower," he said. Panic seized Andrew again.

"Good idea," Victoria said. "But not here. You can't shower here. It's broken. The . . . the shower's broken."

"Soon fix that."

"No. Er . . . there's no time now. Anyway, I've . . I've called a plumber. Use our bathroom."

The Animal gave another grunt and went out. Silence fell once more. Andrew waited. Minutes passed and then he heard the shower turned on in the bathroom below him. A glorious feeling of relief came over him at the prospect of the frightful ordeal of the afternoon being over at last.

He straightened his tie, brushed his hair back with his hand, opened the bathroom door – and came face to face with the Missing Link. It simply stood there before him in the middle of the bedroom, huge, immense with muscle, covered in curly black hair and stark naked. For a second he and it stared at each other, Andrew petrified, the Missing Link astonished. Then . . . "Excuse me," Andrew said and locked himself in the bathroom again, just as Victoria's frightened face appeared behind her husband in the bedroom doorway.

"Victoria!" yelled the Animal. "Victoria! . . . Oh, there you are. Victoria, there's a man in our bathroom."

"A man? In our bathroom?" Her voice was shrill, cracking on the high notes.

"Yes. In our bathroom. A man. Who is he?" Andrew, his ear pressed fearfully to the door, waited for the answer with as much eagerness as the Animal.

Victoria said: "Ah . . . ah . . . um . . . a burglar! He must be a burglar!" You silly cow! Andrew thought. The Animal was as likely to kill him for being a burglar as for being his wife's lover. The same thought must have occurred to Victoria for, hurriedly, she said: "No . . . no . . . of course not . . . how silly of me. He must be . . . he must be the plumber, come to mend the shower."

"The plumber?" Andrew could almost hear the Animal thinking. "I didn't hear any plumbers come in."

"Well, they . . . they move quietly, plumbers."

"Right," said the Animal. "I'll ask him." There was a sudden thunderous rapping on the bathroom door. Andrew gave a little yelp and leapt backwards as the Animal shouted: "I say, you in there – are you a plumber?"

Andrew examined himself in the bathroom mirror. In his grey suit, blue shirt and striped tie he might have passed for many things but a plumber, and certainly a plumber on active service, was not one of them. "No," he said, adding to keep his options open, "not exactly."

There was a pause. "He says he's not exactly a plumber," said the Animal.

"Well, he must be," Victoria said, sounding close to hysteria, her imagination apparently stopping at burglars and plumbers. "Perhaps . . . perhaps he means he's only a part-time plumber."

There was another thunderous rap. "Are you a part-time plumber?" asked the Animal.

Andrew stared at the reflection of his own haunted eyes in the mirror. He didn't know how long he could go on playing this nightmare version of *What's My Line?* But then, at last, inspiration returned to Victoria. She uttered a wild squeal of laughter and cried: "Of course!

How silly of me! I know who it is. It's . . . it's Claire's date."

"Who?" said the Animal

"Claire's date. You know. I told you – people coming to dinner. Well, Claire's one of them and this . . . this must be her date." There was another tap on the door, lighter this time and Andrew heard her say: "Excuse me, are you Claire's date? Er . . . Andrew, is it?"

Andrew did some fast thinking: in the circumstances to be Claire's date was a vast improvement on being a burglar or a plumber, part-time or otherwise. "Yes," he said, "that's me." Slowly, cautiously he opened the door and stepped out into the bedroom. That first glimpse of the Animal, he realised now, had not done the man justice. At closer, longer inspection he turned out to be even bigger and hairier than Andrew had realised, a truly terrifying mixture of Caliban and the Incredible Hulk. He was still completely naked.

"There!" Victoria said. "See? It's Claire's date. Andrew . . . er, Andrew Weston, isn't it?"

"Yes," Andrew said. "Andrew Weston. Claire's date. How do you do?" He proffered his hand but the Animal ignored it. His head was thrust forward on its immense neck as he examined Andrew closely.

"What are you doing in my bathroom?" he asked.

"Well . . . well, well I . . . I'm afraid I . . . I desperately wanted to pee. And . . ." He remembered the sound of the shower downstairs a few minutes – or was it hours? – ago. "And there was someone in the bathroom downstairs and . . . and so I came up here."

Time passed while the Animal slowly absorbed this information. Then he said: "Are you a rugby player? You don't look like a rugby player."

"No, I'm afraid not." And then, seeing a scowl developing on the Animal's face, he added quickly, "I play cricket, though."

This was clearly not as good as rugby but it seemed to be the next best thing because the scowl faded a little.

"Cricket, eh?"

"Yes. Cricket."

"You ever played cricket in Hong Kong?"

"Er . . . no. No, I haven't."

"I have."

There seemed to be no adequate response to this and Andrew merely stood there, silent and wearing a sickly grin while the Animal stood opposite him wearing nothing. He didn't seem to be aware of his nudity; presumably a lifetime of hanging around rugby changing rooms made a man totally unselfconscious about his body. Certainly the Animal's body, what could be seen of it through the hair, was immensely impressive in every department. Victoria, now rapidly regaining some kind of composure, became aware of all the naked masculinity beside her. "Animal," she said, "don't you think you'd better put some clothes on?"

"What? Oh. Yes. Reminds me. That's what I came up here for – get my stuff." He began collecting his socks, underwear and the like from the chair and the floor.

"Good heavens," Victoria said. "I haven't introduced you yet. Andrew, this is my husband, David. His name's David," she added with great significance and Andrew, his senses fully alert in what was still a potentially parlous predicament, realised that what she was trying to tell him was that it would be a grave and possibly terminal error for him to address the Animal as "Animal".

"Stopping for dinner, are you?" said the Animal, not sounding as if the prospect gave him much pleasure. Andrew realised with horror that it was getting on for seven o'clock and Laura would be expecting him home.

"No," he said. "No. Um, I can't. That's . . . that's why I'm here. I came to tell you I couldn't come for dinner."

Again there was a pause while the Animal attempted to take in this latest development. "You came to my house to tell me you couldn't come to my house for dinner?" he asked, knitting his brows in concentration and, owing to his lack of forehead, apparently knitting his hair in with them.

From below, saving Andrew from the obligation of expounding further on his unlikely theme, came a female cry of "Cooee!"

"Oh, my God!" said Victoria. "It's Claire!" She rushed to the bedroom door and shouted down the stairs. "Claire! Hello, Claire. Don't come up, Claire! Your date's here."

"My date?" said Claire from about one and a half storeys down.

"Yes. Andrew."

"Andrew?"

"Yes! Andrew. Andrew Weston – your date!"

"Andrew Weston? My date?"

The Animal, listening to all this, eyebrows still inextricably knitted into his hair, said: "Doesn't seem to remember you. Doesn't even seem to know you. You sure you're her date?"

"Yes, of course, he's her date," Victoria said desperately. "Claire's . . . Claire's very absent-minded sometimes. Look, I'll go down and talk to her and . . ."

"I say," Andrew said. "I really can't stay for dinner."

"Of course you can stay for bloody dinner!" yelled Victoria, and rushed away downstairs to where Claire was muttering: "Where the hell are you, Victoria? I don't know what you're talking about."

Left alone in the bedroom the two men stared at each other for a moment or two, Andrew uneasily, the Animal still suspiciously. "Seems you're staying for dinner after all," said the Animal.

"Yes. Er . . . do you think I could make a phone call?"

"Who to?"

"My wife."

"Your wife? You've got a wife?"

Andrew nodded. The Animal went to the bedroom door and shouted down the stairs. "Victoria! This fellow's got a wife."

"I know," Victoria shouted back.

"What's he doing with Claire then? If he's got a wife? Are they having an affair? I won't have them having an affair in my house."

"Of course they're not having an affair in your house! They're just friends."

The Animal turned back to Andrew. "Is that right – you're just friends?"

"Yes."

"Seems very odd to me," said the Animal. "You turn up here, ages before you're expected, just to have a pee and tell us you can't come. Got a wife at home and a dinner date who doesn't even seem to know you. It's all very strange. Still, if Victoria says it's all right, I suppose it must be." On which note he went out.

Andrew sat down weakly on the bed. After a minute or two, when he had recovered a little, he used the bedside telephone to call his home. There was no reply. He sighed wearily and went downstairs to a sitting-room on the first floor to join the dinner party and when he got there he found Victoria and Claire and an Animal still damp from the shower having drinks with the other two guests – Charles and Caroline Kaufman. Andrew was hardly even surprised to see them; the way his luck was running today he half expected McCulper to turn up. But the Kaufmans were certainly surprised to see him. "Good God!" said Charles Kaufman by way of greeting and . . . "So *you're* Claire's date," said Caroline Kaufman, nodding in a meaningful sort of way.

"Found him upstairs in the guest-room having a pee," said the Animal.

"In the guest-room?" said Claire and Caroline in unison, exchanging significant looks; but Victoria cut short her husband's reminiscences by instructing him to get Andrew a drink. And it was while he was doing so, at the table by the window, that the Animal looked out into the street and said: "Ah, he's going at last. Wonder what he's been up to."

"Who?" said Victoria.

"Chap out there. In the street."

"Yes, dear," she said patiently. "But who is he?"

"Don't know."

The assembled company waited politely for further revelations but as none seemed to be forthcoming they were about to resume their own conversations when the Animal said: "Chap in a bowler hat." Again everyone

turned in his direction as he stood staring out of the window, Andrew's drink forgotten on the table beside him.

After a while Victoria said: "Let's see if I've got this straight. There is a man out there, identity unknown but wearing a bowler hat, who is now about to leave. Is that the plot so far? Because if it is I can tell you it will never sell . . ."

"Been there for hours. He was there when I came home. Thought he might be an estate agent or something."

Caroline said: "Perhaps he's a burglar, casing the street."

The Animal shook his head. "No, can't be. He's wearing an M.C.C. tie."

"I expect Raffles wore an M.C.C. tie," said Claire, "and he was a burglar."

"This chap's got an artificial leg."

"What!" said Andrew and in a moment he was out of the room and out of the house and into the street. But he was just too late for as he hit the pavement all that was to be seen was a Ford Escort slowly turning the corner. He began to run after it but the sudden movement only accentuated the feeling of discomfort in his bladder that had been growing on him for the last five minutes or so. For a moment, disturbed by the unexpected return into his life of the man with the artificial leg and wanting nothing more than to get away from the dinner party and the brooding menace of the Animal, he toyed wistfully with the idea of getting into his own car and just driving away. But when he glanced up he saw five faces staring down at him from the window. He went back into the house.

"What was all that about?" said Caroline Kaufman. Her husband said nothing.

Andrew was aware of Claire frowning thoughtfully at him. "A man with an artificial leg?" she said. "Didn't you . . . ?" She broke off suddenly.

Andrew said: "Look, it's nothing. Really. Much too complicated to go into now, much too boring . . . Um, excuse me, but I really must go to the loo."

"You've only just been," said the Animal.

"Well, I want to go again." And he went. But in his confusion and his anxiety he discovered, when he got there, that he was quite unable to perform. He stood for some while bursting inwardly while nothing happened and then, when at last he was able to begin, he found he couldn't stop. From the sitting-room across the hall he could hear the others, discussing him.

"He's been in there an awful long time," Victoria said. "Do you suppose he's all right?" Andrew felt himself blushing with embarrassment.

"Hang on," said the Animal, "I'll ask him." He crossed the hall and banged on the bathroom door. "You all right in there?"

"Yes, I'm fine."

"Yes, he's fine," said the Animal. "Peeing like a racehorse."

When Andrew finally emerged the others looked at him strangely but by then dinner was ready and at least the conversation had moved on from the man with the artificial leg. They all trooped downstairs to the dining-room where Andrew was placed beside Claire and opposite Caroline and there began for him a most uncomfortable meal. For it became clear that Caroline, though no longer interested in him herself, was yet offended to find him escorting another woman in her presence and she questioned him closely about how long he and Claire had known each other and how they had met; and she remarked, sweetly but loudly, that dear Laura must be terribly understanding to let him go to quite intimate little dinner parties with other women.

"Quite agree," said the Animal. "Doesn't seem right to me. Chap with a wife, going around with other women."

Andrew remembered with dismay that Laura had no idea where he was but things being as they were he could hardly ask if he might phone her again so he sat and smiled tightly while Caroline returned subtly to the attack and Victoria tried to rescue him by explaining that it was she who had asked him to escort Claire, just to make the numbers even, and Caroline, following up all

her left jabs with a solid little right hook, said how lucky Andrew was then, because Claire was *sooo* pretty and if she, Caroline, was dear Laura she wouldn't be able to help feeling just a teeny bit jealous . . .

"Doesn't seem right to me," said the Animal. "Doesn't seem right at all." For a long time after that he contributed hardly anything to the conversation but concentrated on demolishing great heaped plates of food. Andrew ate little and spoke little either. Indeed, nobody said much for the atmosphere at the table was decidedly strained. Throughout the first two courses the conversational ball was mostly tossed back and forth between Victoria and Caroline and from occasional references to Aunt This and Uncle That Andrew realised that the two women, though ten years apart in age, were cousins, which at least explained the Kaufmans' presence at the table.

But by the time the fruit salad was served even the family gossip had dried up and there was quite a long silence that was broken only by the sound of the Animal eating before Kaufman said: "By the way, how was Hong Kong, David?"

"Hot," said the Animal.

"Ah."

A little later Kaufman tried again: "Never been to Hong Kong. What are the Chinese like?"

The Animal gave the question deep consideration, his eyebrows and hair knitting themselves into a kind of balaclava. "Little short yellow jobs," he said, holding his hand out some three foot six inches above the floor. "About so high. Slanty-eyed."

"Yes, dear," Victoria said. "I'm sure we all know what they look like. I think what Charles meant was, what are they like otherwise?"

More deep consideration. "Not bad at cricket, some of 'em," said the Animal, "but pretty useless at rugby." He fell silent again.

"That's it then, is it?" said Victoria. "That's all there is to be said about the Chinese?"

"Pretty much. Went there once on a rugby tour. Murdered 'em. Wings, centres, three-quarters a bit

nippy till you've flattened them a few times but the packs are useless. Much too light."

"You flattened quite a few of them, did you?" Andrew asked.

"Many as I could."

"I see. It was a sort of goodwill mission, was it?"

The Animal nodded. "Exactly. Flying the flag, showing the little buggers there's life in the old country yet."

After this the conversation petered out again while Victoria went to the kitchen to make the coffee and the Animal attacked about half a pound of Stilton cheese. Kaufman began to ask Claire polite questions about herself and Caroline returned to her assault on Andrew . . . "So, then, Andrew, do you and Laura have a sort of arrangement? You know – you can each go out with other people? How civilised."

Kaufman and Claire stopped what they were saying and listened. Andrew said: "Well, it's not quite as you make it seem. Actually, it's more like your arrangement, really."

"What do you mean?" For the first time Caroline began to look a little uneasy.

"Simply that sometimes, when Charles is busy, you go to concerts and operas with other men and Charles knows all about it. After all, I've escorted you occasionally and Oliver Lloyd did the other night."

Again there was that uneasy look. "How did you know about Oliver?"

It occurred to Andrew that he had her on the run. "He told me about it." A pause. "He told me *all* about it." Kaufman was watching him intently and Caroline was watching her husband, just as intently but much more anxiously. Andrew began to suspect that however confidently Caroline may have boasted about her financial hold over Kaufman she was not so sure of herself as to be careless of whether or not he knew of her occasional experiments in adultery.

"What does that mean?" Kaufman asked but Andrew was spared the necessity of answering by the return of Victoria with the coffee. Bright and inconsequential

chatter covered the pouring, the passing of cream and sugar and the provision by the Animal of brandy and liqueurs but by the time all that was done the familiar strained silence had fallen on the dinner table. As a host the Animal was generous in his provision of food and drink but as far as social intercourse was concerned he appeared to be a distinct liability being much given, on this occasion at least, to spells of deep brooding occasionally relieved by the darting of suspicious looks at Andrew. Clearly such mind as he possessed had something on it and Andrew was uneasily afraid that this had much to do with his own surprising emergence from the guest bathroom.

After a lengthy pause Kaufman said: "Tell us more about Hong Kong, David."

"Quite a decent golf course there." Now the Animal was glowering openly at Andrew. It was as if his lengthy and laborious spell of deliberation had brought him to a conclusion that was not at all to Andrew's advantage.

"Yes," Kaufman said, gallantly and a shade desperately trying to keep the chit-chat going. "A golf course, quite. But surely there must be other . . ."

"Want to ask you something," the Animal said to Andrew. "What . . ."

And Andrew, fearful lest the line of interrogation should include such questions as how he had got into the house in the first place that afternoon and how he had managed to make his way right up to the guest bedroom without anyone hearing him – questions, in short, to which he had no plausible answers – tried to head the man off by babbling a question of his own; and the question he babbled, the first inane thought that came into his troubled mind was: "Is it true what they say about Chinese women?"

He knew at once that he had made a fearful mistake, for there was an embarrassed drawing of breath around the table and the Animal leaning forward in what seemed to Andrew a most threatening manner, his balaclava pulled down right over his eyes, said: "I don't know. What do they say?"

"What? Well . . . Haven't you heard?"

"No. Tell me."

"Well, I . . ." Andrew glanced eagerly around the table for support but none was forthcoming. The others were still looking pointedly in any direction but his and his nerve failed him. "Well, I don't know," he said lamely.

The Animal was not prepared to let matters rest there. "You must know. What's the point of asking me if it's true what they say about Chinese women if you don't know what it is they say?"

"Well, it's a . . . it's a sort of joke."

"Oh?" The Animal gave the nod of a man who had heard about jokes and was unimpressed by what he had heard. "A joke, eh? A dirty joke, I'll be bound. Well, I don't like dirty jokes about women."

Andrew, intensely uncomfortable though he felt, could hardly believe this. "Oh, come on. You can't play rugby and not like dirty jokes about women."

"What do you know about rugby?"

"Well . . . not a lot really but . . ."

"Then what do you mean by impugning the good name of chaps who play rugby?" The Animal looked across at his wife. "Hope you'll forgive me saying this, Victoria, but I don't much like your friend. Well, *your* friend, Claire. Comes here, a complete stranger to me, pees in every room in the house before he even says howdy-do, eats a four-course meal after saying his sole purpose in coming, apart from treating the place like a public convenience, was to insist that he couldn't possibly stay for dinner and then starts telling me dirty jokes about women at my own table. I rather hope you won't bring him again, Claire." He turned his hairy gaze back to Andrew. "Sorry to be so pointed, bad form in a host and all that, but I'm a blunt sort of chap." He got up. "Go and get some more wine now." At the door he paused and looked back. "Nearly forgot. I was going to ask you a question." Andrew waited fearfully. "What's the matter with your bladder? Got a weakness in it?"

Andrew shook his head, too crushed, too humiliated to speak.

"Oh, thought you had," said the Animal and went out.

Victoria said: "Sorry, Andrew, I should have warned you. David may not look much like a knight errant but that's what he is at heart. He thinks all women, especially me, are delicate, ethereal creatures. I sometimes think he's the last receptacle of chivalry in the world. You couldn't have known, of course, but it would have been better if you hadn't asked him about Chinese women."

"God, you're a fool," said Kaufman, putting it another way.

Andrew rose, still glowing with shame. "I think I'd better leave."

"Yes," Victoria said. "That might be best."

The Animal came back with a wine bottle in each hand. "Going, are you?" he said. "Goodbye." Andrew muttered something about seeing himself out and fled before any of the others could gainsay him.

Despite the abject nature of his exit it was a great relief to be alone again and in his car, driving swiftly away from the awful tension of the dinner party and of the dreadful afternoon he had spent locked in the bathroom. He could not remember when, if ever, he had had such a bad time and when he thought of the ignominy of his flight from the house he found himself moaning aloud.

But . . . he'd got away with it, that was the main thing. And having got away with it he resolved that never again would he put himself in a position where women could take advantage of him. They were nothing but trouble, women, when their blood ran hot. Three times this week he had been manipulated and used by them and none of the three had cared a jot about him or his feelings. Their unerring instinct had marked him down as an easy lay and that was how they had treated him. Well, all right he didn't have to be an easy lay but the problem was that modern, liberated woman had cunningly adapted the rules of the sex game to suit her own ends. It was still accepted that a woman, propositioned by a man, could tell him frankly that she did not wish to go to bed with him. But as far as Andrew knew nobody had yet drawn

up sub-section *ii* of that particular rule whereby a man, similarly propositioned by a woman, could respond in the same way without appearing unchivalrous and laying himself open to serious charges of porcine chauvinism. The fact that he had actually been seduced only once in three attempts since Sunday was purely down to luck, good or bad depending upon the way you looked at it.

As he approached the outskirts of Martindale, still tingling with the memory of the day's humiliations, he was inclined to think that on the whole it had been good luck. The question was: would his luck hold? would it still be with him when he got home?

As it happened it wasn't, for Laura was in bed awake and waiting for him.

"Where have you been?" she asked.

"Look, I'm awfully sorry. Really I am. I tried to phone you but . . ."

"Where have you been?" she asked again.

"To a dinner party. It . . . it just sort of came up. I was with this publicity girl – and her husband, of course. I mean, he was there and . . ."

"Who is she?"

"What? I just told you. She's a publicity girl, with a film company, and she . . ."

"Not her. She was with her husband. Who was the girl *you* were with?"

Stunned, he said: "What do you mean? How did you know . . ."

"Daddy called me about half an hour ago. He'd been on the phone to Charles Kaufman and Charles told him about this girl you were with, this very pretty girl that you obviously knew quite well."

"Your father told you? Your bloody father?"

"Don't talk about Daddy like that! He hated telling me, I know he hated it, but he felt it was his duty and he was right. I sit here all night, not knowing where you are because you're too carried away by some little tart even to phone me and . . ."

"Laura, it wasn't like that." (This was true.) "I've only met the girl once before." (True again, though not exactly

the whole truth.) "And I was only with her tonight because Victoria, that's the hostess, asked me along to . . . to make the numbers up." (Also true, at least in part.) "But, but nothing *happened*." (Well, not tonight anyway.) "I didn't even drive her home." (Absolutely true; no question about it.)

"I don't believe you," Laura said. Her manner was icy, controlled and remote. Andrew would have felt much less uneasy if she had been weeping, or even furious. "Daddy said that Charles said there was something very strange about the whole business and they think that you and this girl . . ."

Furious himself now at the injustice of it all, he said: "What the hell does Daddy know? What the hell does Kaufman know? If you prefer to listen to malicious, slanderous gossip . . ."

"I don't want to talk about it any more." She switched her bedside light out and turned away from him. "You're disgusting."

He stood for a moment, angry, indignant, guilty, the knowledge of his own hypocrisy merely fuelling his rage. And then he left her and went into the bathroom, the only consolation in his troubled state being the certainty that when he came out again the Animal wouldn't be lurking there in wait for him.

9

Later, when all the pieces had been put together, it was widely, though by no means universally, agreed in the corridors of Nat-Met that the catastrophic events of Friday could be attributed in large part to Leonard Wishman's obsession with the Princess of Wales.

Time, somebody once wrote (on a lavatory wall, as a matter of fact) is nature's way of stopping everything happening at once. But with hindsight at the far end of the day it seemed to Andrew that on Friday nature's great design broke down and everything *did* happen at once. Reflecting, in as much tranquillity as was left to him when the day ended, and breaking everything down into its component parts, he remembered that the omens had been bad from the start.

He had wanted to talk to Laura before he left for the office but she had refused even to wake up. He had showered and dressed and made tea and taken her a cup, only to find her apparently immersed in unbreakable slumber and though he shook her and hissed in her ear, she merely mumbled irritably and turned her face into the pillow. Whether she was truly asleep or simply pretending he was not sure and in any case he had no time to find out. He left her with the events of last night still unexplained by him and drove to the office.

There he found much unusual activity going on. Conferences were taking place in Kaufman's room. Mark Payne spent a long time in there and when he came out he was immediately followed in by Maurice Bowles. Half an hour later Bowles emerged, looking inscrutable, and within a few minutes Meg was summoned in. She stayed there for twenty minutes or so and then returned to the

production office, quiet and thoughtful. Claudia was next in and when she came back, as quiet and thoughtful as Meg, she said: "Andrew, Charles wants to see you. No, not now – this evening, immediately after the programme."

"What for?"

"I don't know. He'll tell you." She hesitated and added: "I'll wait for you. Perhaps we could have a drink later."

Andrew was aware of all these things happening but had no opportunity to contemplate them too deeply for he was busy writing his script for the evening's programme and working out his questions for the gay roller-skater and for Aimée Amoura. There was unusual bustle and anxiety even in the production office that day because Leonard Wishman had failed to turn up and there was no reply to calls to his home. Meg was on the point of sending someone round in a taxi to see if he was ill or dead or something when the secretary remembered, with a start of guilt, that Leonard had hinted yesterday that he might possibly be late; and though this was a relief in the sense that a floor manager absent on private business was marginally preferable to a floor manager lying dead in his lonely flat, it did not help matters a great deal because a floor manager really came into his own on programme days when it was his responsibility to ensure that everything in the studio was as it should be.

"That bloody Leonard!" said Meg, crossly, and in order to get the work started from somewhere rustled up a substitute floor manager, a trainee whose enthusiasm was matched only by his inexperience. She gave him Leonard's studio plans and was trying to explain to him how the *Capital Week* set should be put up and where the programme logo should be in relation to Andrew's desk and the interview area when word came through that she had a visitor in reception. She went away, muttering angrily, and returned a few minutes later with a balding, hard-eyed man in tow.

"This is a policeman," she said shortly. "He wants to know where Leonard is."

"Tell him to get in the queue," Andrew said from

behind his typewriter, his concentration shattered by the interruption. "Everyone wants to know where Leonard is." He looked at the policeman. "What do you want with him anyway?"

"What do you know about him?" asked the policeman, cleverly answering one question with another, a trick he had doubtless learned at policeman's school.

Andrew shrugged. "Not a lot. What is there to know? He's single, middle thirties, lives alone in a maisonette in Crouch End. He's been here, what? about three months."

"He's in love with the Princess of Wales, of course," said Meg, glancing up from the studio plans.

"Aha," said the policeman. "So you know about that?"

"Certainly we do," said Andrew. "It's no secret. He writes to her every day."

"Yes, but what does he write?" asked the policeman.

"How the hell should we know?" Meg said. "We don't pry into the intimate correspondence of a man and the Princess he loves."

Andrew said, thoughtfully: "Actually, I do know what was in his last letter, the one he wrote yesterday. He was asking her to run away and live with him."

"What!" said the policeman, springing up in alarm. "Why didn't you tell me this before?"

"I didn't have much chance, did I? Anyway, she won't have got the letter yet because he only put a second-class stamp on it. She probably won't get it for months . . . Hang on. You're not, surely you're not after Leonard because of his letters to the Princess?"

"Did I say that?" asked the policeman craftily.

"Well, no, but . . ."

"Do you happen to know what else he wrote in his letters?"

"No, I don't. But if that's not what you're here about what does it matter anyway?"

The policeman lowered his voice conspiratorially. "Well, as a matter of fact, I *am* here about those letters of his. In the last one that came into our possession he was uttering threats through the mail."

"Threats?" Meg said, incredulously.

"Precisely, madam. He said . . ." The policeman cleared his throat, "he said he could no longer bear to think of her in the arms of another – I'm quoting verbatim, you understand – and he was on the point of doing something desperate."

Andrew laughed jeeringly. "You call that a threat? I don't call that a threat. What kind of threat is it?"

"Listen, chummy," said the policeman irritably, "ever since that last caper when that bloke got into the palace and started chatting up the Queen in her own bedroom, we take everything as a threat. If anyone even so much as farts within earshot of the royal family we treat it like a pistol shot, right? So when your Mr bloody Wishman starts writing about doing something desperate that's a threat in our book. You want to make anything of it?"

"No," Andrew said.

Suddenly the secretary, who had been studying the week's Diary of Events, glanced up triumphantly. "I know where Leonard is," she said. "At least I'm pretty sure I do – he's at the hospital."

"Which hospital?" said the policeman. "Some kind of psychiatric hospital?"

"No, silly, the one down the road. He'll be at that new wing the G.L.C. has built – the Fidel Castro Wing. The Princess of Wales is opening it this morning."

"What!" said the policeman. In a flash he was up from his chair and racing for the door. "Why didn't somebody tell me? Nobody ever tells me anything."

Now what exactly happened after that did not emerge until some time afterwards but, from a piecing together of the evidence, it is fairly safe to say that at just about the time the policeman reached the street and began remonstrating vociferously with a traffic warden who was about to give him a parking ticket, the Princess of Wales, meltingly pretty in something blue with a hat to match, was being ushered with her entourage onto the makeshift platform set up in front of the new Fidel Castro Wing of the local hospital, some two miles away. And while the policeman was searching for his warrant card the Princess

was being introduced to various mayors, aldermen, councillors, surgeons, physicians and assorted hospital administrators. And while the policeman was tearing the parking ticket into a hundred pieces and throwing them on the ground and stamping on them and the traffic warden was laboriously making a note of the officer's name and number preparatory to laying a complaint with the Commissioner of Police, one of the hospital worthies was rising to his feet on the platform to inform Her Royal Highness and a crowd of some two or three hundred what an honour it was and so forth.

And in that crowd of people, adoring the vision in blue, stood Leonard Wishman with a bunch of roses in his hand.

The first notable finished speaking and there was a slight hiatus while the chairman of the hospital board, a stout, elderly, politician who had recently been ennobled after a lengthy career in the House of Commons distinguished only by the fact that never once, not even when drunk – which was not infrequently – had he strayed by mistake into the wrong voting lobby, was nudged awake. And he struggled to his feet and started speaking just about the time when the policeman slammed his car into gear and aimed it at the traffic warden, who escaped certain death only by revealing a remarkable swiftness of foot.

The ennobled politician's speech was mercifully brief, largely because, while asleep, he had forgotten most of it and then the Princess of Wales stepped to the microphone, wearing the shy delicious smile that had caused millions of men all over the world to reflect that being the prospective King of England was not such a bad job if a wife who looked like that came as part of the basic equipment.

Leonard Wishman, enraptured by her beauty, leapt up and down in the depths of the crowd, crying: "Diana . . . Darling . . . It's me, Leonard." The crowd laughed and the Princess pointed the famous smile, a little more uncertain now than it had been before in his direction and Leonard, anxious to make her realise that the Leonard

who had thus addressed her was no ordinary, common or garden Leonard but that same Leonard whose letter, designed dramatically to alter her life, was even now on its way to her by second-class post, sought desperately for words to attract her attention – romantic words, poetical words, words to cause a beautiful woman to catch her breath. But, as is customary on such occasions, no words came. He was about to lose the moment for ever when he decided to substitute action for words and crying, "Diana, catch!" drew back his arm in order to throw his bouquet of roses to her.

And it was then that the policeman, arriving late and flustered but apparently in the nick of time, spotted him and shouting, "Look out – it's a bomb!" leapt upon him and knocked him to the ground, whereupon many more policemen leapt upon the pair of them, regardless of the danger posed by the roses which might, theoretically, explode at any moment.

Miraculously, Leonard very nearly escaped. Somehow he scrambled out from beneath the heaving pile of bodies and, though dazed, was still in sufficient possession of his senses to realise that this was a good place to get away from as smartly as possible. But unfortunately he staggered to his feet beside a large, middle-aged, powder-blue-suited woman – an identikit Conservative Party woman, one who had clearly been reared from birth to be a pillar of the Tory movement and had been reared to such a degree of physical solidity as to be a pillar that even Samson would have had difficulty in tearing down. And she, recognising the assassin with the explosive roses, smote him so lustily with her Harrod's shopping bag that he fell stunned to the ground beside the mound of struggling policemen; and he was still lying there when the policemen stopped pummelling each other and squeezing each other's throats and genitals and stood up and recognised him in their turn . . .

So it was, that some hours before *Capital Week* went on the air, Leonard Wishman, the programme's floor manager, was being held in a cell at the local nick while various policemen tried to decide which of many offences

to charge him with, from disturbing the peace to high treason. And nobody at Nat-Met knew what had become of him.

With only half an hour to go to air-time, the production team still had no idea where Leonard was and it was then that Meg made her fateful decision and told the young, untried and innocent assistant floor manager that he was now in charge. Later, of course, everyone said that this was Meg's first and biggest mistake; and that if only Leonard had been there none of what followed could have happened. But it was easy to say that later . . .

Actually, everything started smoothly and quite uneventfully.

Andrew was in the studio, rehearsing his script on autocue, when Aimée Amoura was brought in to meet him. She was considerably older and there was a great deal more of her than the photographs in her book had given him to understand but, with judicious make-up and careful lighting, she could still pass as a handsome woman. She wore something darkish and shiny and décolleté, with two generous hillocks of breast bulging above the top, and she was accompanied by someone she introduced as her "companion and manager", a thin young man with long hair and jeans and a guitar.

She greeted Andrew with a kittenish smile and announced that they were going to have fun. Andrew privately had cause to disbelieve this because in his experience the actual business of television was nerve-racking rather than fun but politely he agreed that fun was what they were going to have.

Miss Amoura leaned close to him. "Don't worry about the surprise," she whispered. "I've fixed it with your boss."

"What?" Andrew said. "What surprise?"

She winked roguishly. "That's the spirit."

"Three minutes to studio," said the young floor manager in a nervous squeak.

"What surprise?" said Andrew, but Miss Amoura was being led away to wait in the hospitality room until it was her turn to appear. "What surprise?" he said

again when the floor manager came back from escorting her.

"I dunno. She told me she'd fixed it with my boss." Andrew was wondering whom she could have meant by "boss" – Meg, the producer; Wally, the studio director up there in the gallery? – when the floor manager said: "Start the clock, please."

One of the studio hands set the electric clock and the countdown began. It was at this moment every week that Andrew began to realise what it must feel like to be an astronaut waiting to be blasted out into space. "Thirty seconds," said the floor manager. "Twenty . . . ten . . ." (Adrenalin began pumping wildly around Andrew's body, all his nerve ends started to quiver, his mouth filled with saliva, even though his lips were dry, and he realised as he did each week that he would never be able to swallow again.) "Nine, eight, seven, six, five, four, three . . ." The floor manager stopped counting. Floor managers always stopped counting at three, as if nobody had ever told them what came after three when counting backwards. The monitor screen beside camera one went black and then up came the opening titles, assorted shots of London followed by the words "*Capital Week* – presented by Andrew Weston"; the strains of the title music – "Maybe It's Because I'm A Londoner" – died away, the floor manager pointed to Andrew and the show was on the air.

"Good evening," Andrew said, with the slightly mad grin of the television presenter, as he stared at the autocue on camera one and tried not to move his eyes from side to side as he read, "and welcome once again to *Capital Week*. Well, tonight we have a mixed bag of delights for you . . ."

Sometimes the nervous tension left him as soon as the programme was under way but at other times, and this was one of them, it simply refused to go. He never had been able to understand why this should be so but had merely come to the conclusion that, for reasons beyond his control, he had nervous days and not so nervous days and he assumed that it was probably the

same for everyone else on TV. On nervous days, like this, he found that not only could he swallow after all but that he positively couldn't stop. Thus he gulped his way through the first link while his grin grew slightly more frenzied but at least he didn't fluff and he stopped speaking right on cue as the first film report – of the children's art exhibition – appeared on the monitor screen.

Through the ear-piece that was screwed into his head like a deaf-aid he heard Wally, the studio director, say: "Fine, Andrew, fine. Only, do you think you could gulp a little less? Have a swig of water or something."

He drank some water and did indeed gulp less during his second link but the nervous tension still remained, like a ball of undigested pasta in his stomach. Nevertheless, the show was going well. The children were cute, the housewives rehearsing Sophocles in a Hampstead drawing-room were pleasingly bizarre, the gay roller-skater turned out to be amusing and laconic and even the man with the square carrots looked, in the context of the rest of the show, both lunatic and unintentionally hilarious.

When the commercial break came along, halfway through the programme, and the studio hands started wheeling in the chairs for the Aimée Amoura interview, Wally said: "You're looking good, Andrew, you're looking good. All set for Aimée and the surprise?"

"What surprise?" Andrew said. "I don't know anything about a surprise."

"She said she'd fixed it with the boss. Excuse me a minute . . ." Andrew could hear Wally talking to someone else in the gallery so he turned to the floor manager, who was on his way to collect Aimée Amoura. "Find out about this bloody surprise of hers."

"What?" said the boy who, perhaps understandably, had been in a worse state of nervous tension than Andrew ever since the show began. "Oh, yes – the surprise. Right. Yes. Right."

Wally came back through Andrew's ear-piece. "Two minutes to go. Okay, Andrew?"

"Listen, which boss did she say she'd fixed it with? Did she mean Meg?"

"I suppose so but I can't find out now. Meg's been called back to her office. Apparently Leonard Wishman's in the slammer for threatening Princess Di with an offensive weapon, to wit a bunch of roses. God knows what it's all about. Sorry. Have to go – there's a problem with the video tape . . ."

And so for two reasons Leonard Wishman's incarceration could be said to be responsible for what happened next. Had Leonard not been in the slammer he would have insisted – as his youthful stand-in was too shy to insist – on Miss Amoura revealing what her surprise was to be. And had he not been in the slammer Meg would have been in the gallery to tell Wally and Andrew that no surprise item had been cleared with her; that, in short, Aimée Amoura was a liar.

In any event it didn't seem at first that her surprise would be too bothersome since it appeared to consist of her bringing her companion and manager, complete with guitar, into the studio with her. Since this companion was not to take part in the interview Andrew had not expected his presence, nor indeed did he welcome it. The studio was tiny and cramped enough to begin with and the introduction of an extra, unwanted body was to say the least inconvenient.

"What the hell is he doing in here?" Andrew hissed at the floor manager.

"It's . . . it's part of the surprise," said the nervous youth. "She said it was all right."

"It is *not* all right. What . . . Good God, what's she doing now?"

What she was doing, in fact, was positioning her companion, out of sight, behind the programme logo, which was itself behind and slightly to the right of the interview set-up. "Get him out of there!" Andrew said.

But it was too late.

"Thirty seconds to studio," said the floor manager, by now so tightly strung as to give a most passable imitation

of a boy soprano. Aimée Amoura dropped into the chair opposite Andrew and favoured him with another of her roguish winks.

"Tell the old boiler to stop that winking," said Wally in Andrew's ear. "What is it – some kind of goddam nervous tic? Nobody warned me about a nervous tic . . ."

"Eight, seven, six, five, four, three . . ."

They were back on the air and Andrew was introducing the old boiler and her book to his eager, unseen audience. ". . . and we're very happy to have Aimée Amoura herself in the studio with us now," he concluded. And turning to her, he said: "Welcome, Miss Amoura."

"Oh, thank you, Andy," she said. "I may call you Andy, may I?"

"Well, um . . . Well, yes, if you wish. Now, Miss Amoura – Aimée – tell us something about your life and your work as a stripper. I mean . . ."

"I can do better than that, Andy," she said, switching on the kittenish smile. "I can show you." And so saying she revealed at last her surprise.

From behind the logo came the sound of bump and grind music being played on a guitar. It sounded rather odd on a guitar but bump and grind music it undoubtedly was.

Andrew heard Wally saying: "Where the fuck's that music coming from? Who's playing that music?" But the problems in the gallery were as nothing compared with those in the studio. For now Aimée Amoura had risen to her feet and was moving her hips, lewdly, languidly in time to the music. "You see, dear," she said to Andrew, "you warm the audience up like this – little bit naughty but ever so tasteful."

"Yes," Andrew said, grinning feverishly. "I see. Yes. Ha, ha. Well, I think we've got the idea now . . ."

"And then . . ." She twirled slowly around, bumping and grinding gamely despite the fact that in any strippers' handicap she would be putting up at least three stone overweight. The smile she directed over her shoulder at Andrew was positively coy and her buttocks, large and round as monstrous medicine balls, thrust themselves

at the camera. "And then you get down to the real business . . ."

"Oh, Christ," Wally was muttering. "It's a happening! It's a fucking happening! We don't want a happening; happenings went out in the sixties. Andrew, stop her! Make the silly bitch sit down!"

Andrew said: "Yes, well, er, Aimée, that's . . . that's very interesting but I think we've all got the point now. Perhaps you could just sit down and . . ."

"Sit down?" said Aimée Amoura, still gyrating. "It's a bit more difficult sitting down but if it's better for TV . . ."

The music reached another bump and another grind and . . . "Trala!" said Aimée Amoura, waving her blouse above her head. The top of her body was now covered only by a scarlet brassiere with tassels dangling from the middle of the cups. She sat down, holding her blouse between thumb and forefinger and swinging it in what was meant to be a provocative manner.

"Don't let her go any further!" Wally said. "For God's sake, Andrew, don't let her go any further!"

Andrew said: "Ha, ha. Yes. Well, that's . . . er . . . that's most educational, Aimée. But now perhaps, if we could just stop the music, I'd like to ask you something about your personal . . ." But Aimée Amoura was still wriggling, still smiling – and the tassels on her brassiere were beginning to rotate. Andrew could feel sweat trickling from his armpits and his smile was stretched so tight that his cheek muscles ached. And it was at this point that nature's machinery for stopping everything happening at once appeared to seize up completely for the following things happened and to Andrew, in his bemused and horrified state, they all seemed to happen simultaneously . . .

From the gallery, Wally yelled two sets of instructions. To the floor manager he said: "Stop that fucking music! I don't care how you do it but stop it!" And to Andrew he said: "Make her put her blouse on."

The floor manager dropped to his hands and knees to be below the level of the cameras and began crawling rapidly round the studio towards the logo on the set; Andrew said: "Aimée, I think . . . your blouse . . ."; and

Aimée, who was still swinging the blouse from left to right while the tassels swung from right to left, took him to mean that she should get rid of it and said: "Of course, dear, I was just coming to that. It's what we do in the show when we take things off – we toss them into the audience," whereupon with a graceful gesture she tossed her blouse over the head of the operator of camera two. And he, startled and suddenly blinded, leapt away from his camera and the back of his head came into violent contact with the temple of the operator of camera one, who was passing behind him to change his position. Both men fell, without a murmur, to the floor and lay still, as the sound of a muffled but fierce altercation issued forth from behind the logo, just making itself heard beneath the music of the guitar.

It was at this point that Aimée Amoura, looking more roguish than ever, announced: "And now for a moment of television history!" and she removed her bra and threw it into Andrew's lap.

It took but a second for her to do this but to Andrew, sitting there frozen and helpless, it all seemed to happen in slow motion. First one breast came into view; it was a breast that had admittedly seen better days but it was impressive enough for all that, on the vast side of large with a nipple which, to Andrew's appalled gaze, looked like a small blood orange. Then its sister appeared and these identical twins with their identical blood oranges rose and fell and jiggled and wobbled and shimmied in the full unblinking gaze of camera two.

Wally yelled: "Camera two – get off those tits! Camera one, come in camera one." But there was no response for the operators of cameras one and two were still lying on the floor, only just beginning to stir. "Camera three – for Christ's sake where are you, camera three?" But camera three was in no position to help for it was at the back of the studio behind the other two, lining up on the roller caption for the end of the programme. "Jesus Christ, what's going on? Andrew, cover up those tits – there's a million people watching this!"

Andrew, stirred into action by the verbal panic that

was being poured into his ear, leaned forward impulsively to put the brassiere back where it belonged but Aimée Amoura, misreading his intentions, slapped him saucily on the wrist; the garment fell from his fingers and his right hand closed round one massive, naked breast just as a guitar string snapped loudly behind the set, an irate voice said, "Now look what you've done, you shit!" the logo toppled over and the floor manager and the guitarist, locked together in combat, rolled down the raked platform and knocked Andrew into Aimée Amoura's lap. In the moment before somebody in the gallery pulled the switch and the screen went black, Andrew Weston, presenter of *Capital Week*, was seen by 1,124,276 viewers to plunge his head between the enormous breasts of an overweight, half-naked stripper and pull her, squealing with surprise, to the floor.

After that, mercifully unseen by the television audience, there was real chaos. Those in the gallery came down onto the studio floor and shouted; those who were already on the studio floor shouted back; everybody blamed everybody else; the guitarist punched the floor manager on the nose; Wally accused Andrew of panicking; Andrew accused Wally of incompetence; and Aimée Amoura, still in a state of great excitement danced around the studio with her bra in one hand and her blouse in the other, asking everyone if it had been all right and whether the viewers would have enjoyed it.

In the middle of this Meg, who had watched the whole disaster on the monitor in her office in between fruitless attempts to get Leonard Wishman released on bail, burst in to announce that the switchboard was jammed with calls from deeply offended viewers and that Charles Kaufman wanted to see Andrew now and by now she meant not simply now but five minutes ago.

Andrew reeled out into the corridor. Claudia was standing there, waiting for him. She said: "Andrew, I must talk to you."

"Not now, Claudia. Please, not now."

"When you've seen Kaufman. I must talk to you. I want to explain . . ."

"Later, Claudia, later." He hurried away to keep his appointment with Kaufman, his mind numb with the horror of all that had just taken place, and was halfway along the corridor when the lift at the end of it opened and out sprang the Animal. They saw and recognised each other simultaneously.

"Weston!" roared the Animal. "I'm going to kill you, Weston!"

Andrew was not as astonished as he might have been for the advent of this fearful apparition was, to him, merely in keeping with the other, X-certificate events of the afternoon. Reacting with remarkable speed he plunged through the doorway on his right and galloped up the stairs to the ground floor, the Animal's cry of "Come back, Weston, you philandering swine!" loud in his ears. One flight up, with the Animal grunting and snorting in pursuit below him, he dashed out into the corridor, turned right, took the staircase opposite and charged down to the basement again. As a race it was no contest because Andrew's familiarity with the building made him aware, as the Animal could not be aware, that you had to take these stairs to reach the car park and right now the car park was Andrew's destination and to hell with Charles Kaufman. By the time he reached the bottom of the staircase he could hear the Animal thundering about on the ground floor crying: "Come out, Weston, you can't hide for ever!"

Andrew got into his car and drove away, not caring in which direction, just wanting to put distance between himself and the enraged Animal. When he had gone about two miles he pulled over beside a telephone booth and called the office. Meg answered.

"Andrew! Where the hell are you? Everything's gone completely mad round here – Kaufman's apoplectic, we've got half of Fleet Street roaming the corridors looking for you, something that looks like King Kong's little brother is threatening to kill you and there's a message from a woman called Claire who says you've ruined her life. Listen, are you coming back?"

"Would you?" said Andrew and put the phone down.

He called Claire. "Claire, it's me – Andrew."

She said: "I just want you to know you've ruined my life, you bastard," and she hung up on him. He couldn't begin to imagine how he had ruined her life but just at the moment he had no time even to think about it.

He called Victoria. "Victoria, it's me – Andrew."

"Oh, Andrew, thank God you called. The Animal's gone berserk – he wants to kill you."

"I know that! But why?"

"He's found out about us – about yesterday afternoon."

"What! You didn't . . . you didn't tell him?"

"No, of course, I didn't. Charles Kaufman told him. At least, I think it was Charles. He called about an hour ago anyway. Don't ask me how Charles found out because I don't know. All I do know is that I've never seen the Animal so angry."

"But why does he want to kill *me*? It isn't fair! Why doesn't he want to kill you?"

"Because, well, because I told him it was all your fault. I said you'd taken me to lunch and given me too much to drink and then you tried to seduce me."

"Oh, thanks," Andrew said, bitterly. "You're a real friend."

"Well, what else could I say? The Animal thinks I'm perfect. I couldn't disillusion him, poor darling. It would have broken him up."

"Why the fuck should I care?" Andrew yelled. "He's going to break me up now!"

"I'm sorry, Andrew. It just seemed the best way out. Look, if it's any consolation I told him you didn't succeed – in seducing me, I mean. I said I'd struggled a lot and talked you out of it. He couldn't have been sorrier for me or nicer to me."

"Oh, I'm so glad," Andrew said and brought that conversation to an abrupt conclusion. Kaufman, he thought, Kaufman and the man with the artificial leg – they were together in this. But how did Claire fit in? How on earth had he managed to ruin her life? He stopped thinking about it and called his home. There was no reply.

He called his in-laws' number. McCulper answered, roaring. "Have you gone stark, raving mad? I saw that disgusting exhibition on TV. If you want to rape a fat woman you might at least have the decency to do it in private. I can't even get out of my own home now – we've got the bloody Press camped all over the grounds!"

Andrew said: "Is Laura there?"

"No, she's not! She's gone to the theatre with some friends."

"Friends? Which friends? Which theatre?"

"I don't know and if I did I wouldn't tell you, you pervert! I know all about you and all your women . . ."

Andrew lost his temper, glad to do so, glad to have the opportunity to attack someone else for a change. "Yes, I know you do and you've been breaking the news to Laura like a bloody singing telegram, haven't you?"

"Don't you talk to me like that!"

"Oh, piss off!"

He went back to his car, feeling lonely and afraid. The horrendous events of the last couple of hours had been too much for him fully to comprehend and he didn't know what to do.

In the end he decided to go home but even in that modest intention he was thwarted, for as he approached his house he saw cars parked in the street and in the driveway and men with cameras roaming around the garden. He drove on quickly, unrecognised by the waiting journalists. There were more Press cars parked outside the pub and at the entrance to McCulper's house. He paused for a while in the middle of the village, bewildered, not knowing where to go. He felt like an outcast or, worse, a fugitive with Fleet Street after him in a posse and the Animal tracking him down like some demented bounty hunter.

On an impulse he turned his car towards the Tysons' house, the last remaining possible place of refuge, and noted thankfully on his arrival that the dreaded Press had not infiltrated this far. It was only when he had pressed the bell and Sue had let him in that he remembered who Henry was – the assistant editor of the *Daily*

Journal. He had, in fact, walked straight into the lion's den.

Luckily, however, the lion was not at home; he was working late at the office. Sue said: "Henry will be thrilled to know you're here. He's been hunting everywhere for you. As far as Fleet Street's concerned you're very definitely the flavour of the month right now, did you realise that? I'll give Henry a ring."

"Oh. Yes, I suppose you must. Well, in that case I'll go. I can't face reporters and photographers at the moment, I really can't."

She looked at him closely. "My word, you do look pretty rough. Are you all right?"

He sighed. "I suppose so. I just don't know what's happening to me today. Look, I'll shove off, find a little hotel or something. Tell Henry I'll be back in time for the match tomorrow. I mean, sod it, I'm not going to miss that no matter what."

For a moment the journalist's wife struggled with the compassionate woman and the woman won. "Oh, stay here and don't be an ass. I can't turn you out. Henry will be as mad as hell with me but I don't care. What are friends for anyway? Now come on in and have a drink and I'll get you something to eat and you can tell me why you were squeezing that fat lady's boobs . . ."

So he went in to an oasis of calm and security in a deranged world and he told her what had happened in the studio and indeed everything that had happened that week and though she giggled a great deal she was generally sympathetic and when they had finished eating and talking she prepared a bed for him in one of the spare rooms.

Henry came home around one a.m. and was, as Sue had predicted, as mad as hell when he discovered that the man he and his paper had been looking for all evening was here, in his own home. But by that time Andrew had collapsed into the sleep of the emotionally exhausted and, besides, the last edition of the paper had long since gone to bed as well.

10

The weather on Saturday morning was perfect for cricket – the faintest of breezes, a sky of unblemished blue and the sun up and about its business from the word go.

Henry brought tea to Andrew's room at eight o'clock and remonstrated with him bitterly for not having had the decency last night to dash straight round to the offices of the *Daily Journal* and give his story exclusively to him, his old friend Henry. "It was the very least you could have done," he said. "Instead, you have the bloody gall to come *here* . . . Listen, don't you ever tell anyone where you spent last night or I'll be the laughing stock of the Street." He then tossed the morning papers onto the bed, saying: "Anyway, you're the hottest thing in the news today."

Andrew was on the front page of every newspaper; indeed, as far as the tabloids were concerned he *was* the front page. There were even pictures of him taken from the television screen; they were blurred and fuzzy pictures to be sure but the action in them was plain enough. In one he was on the point of grasping Aimée Amoura's breast and in the other he appeared to be trying to bite it. The stories that accompanied the photographs were no less shaming and humiliating. Descriptions of what happened on the programme, each with a strong implication that Andrew had been carried away by lust, were followed by interviews with Aimée Amoura in which she admitted to having been somewhat taken aback when Andrew pounced on her but adding that she had not been too astonished because "I've always had that sort of effect on men. They can't resist my body."

Charles Kaufman was quoted as saying that Andrew had been under a strain lately and had very possibly

suffered some kind of breakdown. He would, in any event, be suspended from the programme pending a full investigation of the incident. Mr Weston himself, Mr Weston himself read with no sensation of surprise, had not been available for comment.

Just to make it a really bad news day for Nat-Met some of the papers had also got hold of the story that Leonard Wishman was being held in custody on charges relating to a disturbance at the opening by the Princess of Wales of the Fidel Castro Wing of a West London Hospital.

And to make it an even worse day for Andrew all the papers included a Press release that Nat-Met had issued just before *Capital Week* went on the air last night. It said that owing to disappointing viewing figures and a sharp decline in advertising revenue programme changes were to be put into effect as from Monday. Most of these changes, Monday through Thursday, were comparatively minor – it was on Friday that the real shake-up came. The arts programme *Culture* was to be scrapped. But because of Nat-Met's deep commitment to arts coverage (it said in the Nat-Met handout) cultural matters would figure largely in a new, hour-long, peak-time chat show to be hosted by Mark Payne. This would be an "exciting new format with the emphasis on sparkling, intelligent conversation orchestrated by TV's wittiest and most urbane personality." Maurice Bowles, the former presenter of the late *Culture*, would now present an entirely new programme, a thirty-minute round-up of the week's sports news with hard-hitting critical comment from Maurice himself – "TV's sharpest, most perceptive commentator". "Sport with Bowles" would go out at six thirty in the evening while the programme that had occupied this slot until now, *Capital Week*, would henceforth be seen at eleven thirty p.m. and in a slightly revised format. Hitherto, said the handout, it had been presented by Andrew Weston but from next week it would be co-presented by Andrew Weston and Claudia Daventry, a bright new talent developed by Nat-Met. An addendum to this announcement said that owing to the enquiry into Mr Weston's conduct of the previous evening, Miss Daventry would be presenting

the show alone for the first week at least. And in some papers an addendum to this addendum speculated on the possibility that it was disappointment over his demotion that had led to Mr Weston's apparent breakdown.

One way and another, Andrew thought, it could hardly be worse. He was being presented to the nation as a sort of genial sexual nutter, not exactly dangerous but certainly one brick short of a load. It was a hugely depressing prospect.

But at least he was now able to understand all the toing and froing in Kaufman's office yesterday morning; and he knew why Claudia had been so eager to talk to him. It was the thought of Claudia and her treachery that depressed him most: for treachery it surely had been. She had been working for this opportunity to muscle into his programme, hanging around with Kaufman and Mark Payne all week, greasing her way in.

Glancing at all those damning headlines spread around him on the bed he wondered what Laura would be thinking and . . . He sat up abruptly. Laura! He'd tried to phone her before he went to bed but there had been no reply. Lord, he thought, poor Laura! She had no idea where he was; she must be worried sick about him.

He went downstairs to phone her, to reassure her. But there was still no reply. Where on earth could she be? Maybe . . . maybe she'd been injured, killed even, in a car crash on the way back from the theatre. But no, no that couldn't be so. He would have heard or, since he was incommunicado, Henry would have heard at the newspaper office. *Someone* would have heard . . .

At breakfast Sue put forward a less worrying theory. "She probably stayed the night in town with those friends, the ones she went to the theatre with. She's probably been trying to get in touch with you all night. I shouldn't be surprised if you find her at home by the time you get there."

But in this she was wrong.

Andrew went back to his house immediately after breakfast to collect his cricket gear. He wanted to get there before the Press corps began its morning shift, for

he knew that the story of last night's fiasco would not be dead until the newspapers had got hold of his version of the events – or rather their version of his version, which was by no means the same thing. He didn't want to talk to the Press and besides Henry had forbidden him to do so.

"They'll be hanging around all day, all the blokes from the Sundays," he had said. "But I'll handle 'em, leave it to me. I'll tell them the Journal Group has signed you up exclusively and if they get close all you say is 'No comment'. Now, they won't be able to get at you on the pitch and we can keep them out of the changing-room, so the lunch break will be the difficult time. What I'll do, I'll get one of the writers from the *Sunday Journal* to come and interview you here, in my house, at lunchtime. That'll keep the other boys away."

It was still too early for the Press gang when Andrew arrived home and it appeared to be too early for Laura as well, since there was no sign of her and none of the beds had been slept in. Andrew left a note asking her to call him as soon as she came in, packed his bag and returned to Henry's house to wait until it was time for the match.

Just before eleven o'clock, there being still no call from Laura nor any reply from the house, Henry and Andrew, already changed into their whites, drove to the cricket ground and parked at the top end opposite the pavilion. The glorious smell of fresh-mown grass lay, heavy with nostalgia, on the air. Out in the middle the stumps were already in place and Jake who, with Elvis, had been rolling and mowing and marking since soon after eight, stood beside the pitch and looked upon his work and found it good. The others joined him and after nods of greeting all three went through the customary ritual of crouching down and pressing their thumbs into the playing surface. Anyone watching might easily have believed that they knew what they were doing.

"What do you think?" said Jake.

"I dunno," said Andrew.

"It's good and hard," said Henry. They all went through the business of prodding again.

"Surprising it's so hard really," said Jake. "Had to

water it a hell of a lot all week, it being so dry and all. Play a bit fast, do you think? Bounce a lot?"

"Shouldn't be surprised," said Henry.

"If I win the toss," Jake said. "I thought we might bat first." He looked at the others anxiously, seeking their approval, but they remained non-committal. As critics they wished to keep their options open in case batting first turned out to be disastrous. "Well, that's what I'm going to do anyway," Jake added, defiantly.

"You're the skipper," said Henry, and with this decision taken they strolled on towards the pavilion. There were two marquees set up beside it – a large one where the players and their wives and friends would be served meals and drinks during the day and a smaller, private one where president McCulper would entertain his particular guests. Deck-chairs were arranged along the boundary for the spectators and a little apart from the pavilion preparations were already being made for the barbecue at which, after the match, some unfortunate ox would be roasted. Of the ox itself there was as yet no sign but wherever it was it was long past caring.

McCulper came out of the private marquee as the three men approached. He scowled as he always did when he saw Andrew, only today the scowl was more bitter than usual.

"Where's Laura?" Andrew asked.

"How nice of you to take an interest," McCulper said, sarcastically. "You still remember her then, do you?"

"Oh, for God's sake, where is she?" Normally Andrew would have been rather more polite but since he had already told his father-in-law to piss off familial hypocrisy seemed out of place.

"She phoned me from home half an hour ago. Said she was going shopping. I imagine that's where she is."

"Where was she last night?"

"Why don't you ask her?" McCulper turned and went back into the marquee. At the entrance he pointed a finger threateningly at Andrew and said: "I want a word with you later."

"Friendly feller, isn't he?" Jake said. "Heard about

his team?" As they hadn't he told them. "Dowsett and Batchford are playing, of course, and the Jamaican but thank God the Indian's dropped out. They've got a couple of new fellows, blokes I've never seen before. Both a bit useful apparently."

"What happened to the Indian?" Henry asked.

"Don't know. Pulled out yesterday, I gather. They've replaced him with one of the new blokes – all-rounder, scored a few hundreds in Minor Counties cricket up north a few years ago. Or so they tell me."

Jake and Henry went on into the pavilion and Andrew was about to follow them when he saw Kaufman and Caroline coming from the car park towards McCulper's marquee. They were both dressed very much *en fête*: a striped blazer, white trousers and silk neckerchief for Kaufman; a white dress and wide-brimmed matching hat for Caroline. At Henley they would probably have passed unnoticed; here on what was virtually a village green they looked like two people attending a fancy dress party.

Andrew hesitated, recalling that Kaufman had certainly wanted to see him yesterday and would probably want to see him even more urgently now. He was on the point of going over to join them when Kaufman, glancing up, spotted him and, pointing a finger much as McCulper had done, said: "I want a word with you later" and carried on into the marquee.

Andrew went into the pavilion – and an arm, an unseen arm, snaked round his neck, jerking his head back violently against an equally unseen but hard and muscular chest. And the hoarse, terrifying voice of the Animal said: "Got you, Weston, you philandering little scumbag!"

"Uurgh!" said Andrew – an inadequate response but the best he could manage with a powerful forearm pressed against his Adam's apple.

"Victoria told me about you – how you tried to rape her." The forearm pressed harder. Andrew's ears began to buzz. He struggled feebly, wondering in his panic what a man given to butting rugby referees whose decisions upset him would do to someone whom he believed to have tried to rape his wife. "I'm going to give you a thrashing,

Weston," the Animal hissed into his ear by way of response to the unspoken question. "And when I'm finished you'll be lucky if you ever walk again. When I think of Victoria fighting off your loathsome advances . . ."

At this point Henry Tyson emerged from the home changing-room at the far end of the pavilion and said: "What the hell's going on?" The advent of the Seventh Cavalry had never been more welcome to a beleaguered wagon train than Henry's appearance was to Andrew, though there was a tense moment when it seemed that the Animal, thus rudely interrupted, might forgo the pleasure of thrashing Andrew and simply break his neck there and then and have done with it. But in the end he decided, perhaps reluctantly, against this course and merely hurled Andrew away from him in the manner of one flicking something unpleasant off his fingers. "I want a word with you later," he growled and went out.

"What on earth was that?" Henry said. "Is it human?"

"It's an irate husband," Andrew said, or rather croaked for he found it difficult either to speak or swallow.

"Whose? Claire's? Caroline's? Claudia's?"

Andrew shook his head. "Victoria's."

"Victoria's? I thought Victoria was just a business acquaintance. When did you have it away with . . . ?" But at that moment Jake arrived, formally dressed in his faded blue club blazer and cap for the sacred rite of tossing for innings.

"What are you two up to?" he asked.

"Andrew's just been attacked by something that came out of a primeval forest," Henry said.

"Oh, you've seen him, have you? Huge, hairy bloke? That's the one who's replaced Gunga Din in McCulper's team. He came down with that Kaufman fellow. Shouldn't like to meet him on a dark night."

"He doesn't seem a barrel of laughs on a sunny morning either," Henry said.

Jake carried on out. "Wish me luck with the toss," he said. "We'll bat if I win, okay?"

"You're the skipper," Henry said. He and Andrew watched as Jake and Dowsett, the senior of the two

former England players, strolled solemnly to the middle and paced the length of the pitch. Jake did a little more prodding with his thumb but Dowsett merely looked at the surface before Jake produced a coin and flipped it into the air.

It was still in the air when Andrew, watching through the pavilion window, became aware that Oliver Lloyd was standing beside him, clad in white.

"Good God – Oliver," he said. "Don't tell me you're playing. I never knew you were a cricketer."

"Afraid so," Oliver said, with the modest blush that had so endeared him to millions of women around the age of forty. "Arthur roped me in the other day. Wicket-keeper, you know."

"Really? I'd never have thought it."

"Haven't played much for the last few years but . . ." Another modest blush. "I nearly got my blue in my last year at Cambridge. Of course, I'm terribly rusty now. You've nothing to fear." He laughed self-deprecatingly and then shot a look tinged with urgency around the room. "Er, where's the loo here, old boy?"

Andrew recognised the symptoms. There was nothing like cricket and especially the imminent possibility of having to bat to move the bowels. The most certain cure for constipation in the world were the words, "You're in." With some people, however, the symptoms came on even sooner: the very act of changing into whites or putting on their boots could set up irresistible inner rumblings of discontent and Andrew was pleased to see that Oliver, like himself, fell into this category. "It's over there," he said, pointing.

"Oh, thanks. Er, look . . ." For a moment Oliver dithered, caught between an apparent desire to stay and say something and an equally strong desire to go away and do something. He chose the latter course. "I'd like a word with you later," he said and hurried off about his business.

It was most odd, Andrew thought: almost everyone he knew seemed to want a word with him later – everyone, that was, except Laura, who didn't appear to wish to talk

to him at all. He wondered what it was that all these people had to say to him. In this meditation, however, he was interrupted by the return of Jake saying, "Pad up, Elvis, we're batting."

"Won the toss then, Jake, did you?" asked Ron Kettle, who filled in the empty periods between Sunday and Saturday matches by serving as the village schoolmaster.

"No – Dowsett did. He put us in." Jake looked puzzled for a moment. Then he said: "Mind you, I'd have done the same in his place." He caught Henry's eye and had the grace to glance away quickly. "Right, you go first wicket down, Ron. Then you at number four, Henry . . ." And so on through the batting order. Andrew was to go in at number six.

By the time the game started some ten minutes later a healthy sprinkling of spectators had assembled. Mostly they consisted of the camp followers of McCulper's team, the women all very Knightsbridge and exotic and chatting in loud, confident voices; the children answering to names like Crispin and Sarah and looking well-bred and bored. There was also a tidy knot of Fleet Street representatives who had already attempted to interview Andrew and been told by Henry that he had no comment to make on account of the fact that he had been signed up exclusively by the *Sunday Journal*. Now they were lounging about near the scoreboard, plotting ways to thwart Henry and waiting for the pub to open.

Among this crowd, even among the journalists, there was a tingle of expectation as Jake and Elvis marched to the wicket, as firm of jaw and set of purpose as any men who ever opened the innings for their country. It was as though everyone was aware that this was more than just a cricket match, that here honour was at stake; and even the journalists knew about honour because, at one time or another, they had all had it explained to them.

Thus a respectful silence fell on the ground as Jake took his guard, surveyed the field, tugged at the peak of his cap and crouched over his bat while in the distance, some fifty yards away, the West Indian fast bowler who had twice played for Jamaica, began his run up.

He swooped in swift and deadly to the wicket, shirt open to the waist, a medallion on a gold chain swinging around his neck; a final, graceful leap, the whirr of a long right arm and the ball, bright and new and startlingly red whipped through the air, pitched just short of a length, rose a little, hit Jake a painful blow on the thigh and ran away down towards fine leg.

"Come on, Dad!" yelled Elvis and set off up the pitch.

It could have been, and would have been, quite a reasonable start for the village had not Elvis modelled his running between the wickets on that of Clive Radley of Middlesex and England. The Radley (and Elvis) method was to half turn just before finishing the first run, almost to slide into the crease, using the stiff front leg as a lever with which to propel himself back the way he had come for the second run. And indeed there was an easy second run to be taken here for there was nobody at fine leg. The nearest fielder – at third man – was the second former England player, Batchford, who being three stone heavier than in his Test match days now tended to move about the outfield like a man leading a stately procession.

Unfortunately, the Radley method depended very much on the stiff front leg finding a firm foothold but this, alas, was denied to Elvis who, running wide of the pitch, had the ill luck to encounter the only damp patch of grass still remaining after the week's watering. His front foot found no purchase there at all but instead slid wildly on the wet earth and carried straight on. Elvis, off balance and out of control, skidded at high speed past the astonished Oliver Lloyd and hurtled down the slight slope towards the boundary.

And Jake, his eyes fixed on the jogging Batchford, saw none of this. He had completed his own run and turned and was halfway back to the striker's end before he realised that he was running alone. He stopped then and hesitated and dithered and turned back. But he was too late. Batchford's speed of foot may have deserted him but he still had the arm of an England cricketer and his throw came in swift and straight over the top of the stumps and into the bowler's hands. The bails were off,

the "Owzaats!" had been screeched and the umpire's finger raised in stern dismissal while Jake was still two yards from safety.

For a moment he could hardly believe it. And then, head down, shoulders bowed, he began the long, slow trudge back to the pavilion. On his way he passed his son, still lying on the ground where he had come to rest some ten yards beyond the striker's wicket.

"You bloody silly sod, Elvis," Jake said.

"Dad," Elvis said. "Dad . . . I think I've broken my ankle, Dad."

"Well, I hope you bloody have, Elvis," Jake said with the understandable hatred and bitterness of a man who had been run out by his own partner. "I hope you've broken it in eight places." And without even another glance at his son he walked on into the pavilion.

There was a slight hiatus now while three of the fielding side half-carried the stricken Elvis from the pitch and Dowsett, McCulper's captain, held a brief conference with the remainder of his team-mates; after which he ran to the pavilion himself, arriving there a moment after Jake had thrown his bat at the wall.

"Look here," Dowsett said. "Has Elvis really broken his ankle?"

"Hard to say," said Henry, who had taken a look at it. "But it's swelling like a balloon already. He won't be able to bat or field today, that's for sure."

"Right," said Dowsett, turning now to Jake. "Well, if that's the case why don't we start the game again? I mean, only one ball's been bowled and you're already practically two wickets down for one run. It's bloody ridiculous. Sheer bad luck, of course, but nevertheless . . . I mean, if it goes on like this the whole bloody game will be over before noon. So why don't we just scrub what's happened so far and you get a replacement for Elvis and we can start from scratch?"

"Start again?" said Jake, the light of hope returning to his eye. "You mean I'd get another knock? Well now, that's very sporting of you . . ."

But at this moment McCulper burst in, a large Scotch

in his hand and an angry flush in his cheek, demanding to know what the hell was going on and pointing out that the next batsman in (or, things being the way they were, the next two batsmen in) should technically be given out for taking more than two minutes to reach the wicket. Dowsett explained his proposition to him and McCulper's angry flush deepened to purple.

"Not on your life!" he roared. "The game's started – get on with it!"

"But for Christ's sake, Arthur," Dowsett said. "We all want a game of cricket."

"You'll get a game of cricket," McCulper said. "The way this lot bats you'll get two games of cricket – one before lunch and another afterwards. Just get on with it!"

Dowsett said: "Well, I'm sorry, Arthur, but I think this is a decision for the captains. Jake, what do you . . ."

"Bloody ridiculous!" McCulper roared. "Are they going to start squealing and snivelling and wanting to begin the match all over again every time they lose a wicket?"

"That's not the point," Dowsett said. "They've had a lot of bad luck . . ."

"Luck? Luck doesn't come into it. They're just bloody inept!"

But now Jake took a deep breath and slowly shook his head. "We'll continue with the game we've started," he said. "We appreciate your gesture, Chris, but we want no favours and most of all we don't want any charity from him," and he jerked his thumb in McCulper's direction.

McCulper, having won his point, was prepared to overlook jerking thumbs and returned triumphant to his marquee to refill his whisky glass, while Ron Kettle and Henry marched out together to the wicket.

One ball later Oliver Lloyd was hammering the stumps back into the ground with his gloved fist, second slip was wandering about looking for the off bail and Ron Kettle, clean bowled by a wickedly fast yorker, was on his way back to the pavilion.

Jake looked at Andrew with wild and haunted eyes. "I don't believe this," he said. "I just don't bloody believe

it! One rotten leg-bye on the board and we're as good as three wickets down. And they've only bowled two balls!"

"Just as well that Indian's not playing," Andrew said, "or we might be in real trouble."

"This is not funny, Andrew. This is not funny at all. It's all bloody Elvis's fault . . ."

"Talking of Elvis," Andrew said, "don't you think you ought to take him to the hospital? From the way he's moaning I'd say he was in quite a lot of pain."

"Let him bloody moan. Daft idiot. If he wants to go to the hospital, let him go – I'm not stopping him. There'll be a bus along in an hour – he can catch that. Serve him right if he has broken his ankle. If I've told him once about his running between the wickets, I've told him . . ."

He broke off as the new batsman, John Catchpole, a small, bespectacled solicitor, took guard and waited nervously for the West Indian to launch another thunderbolt. It was duly launched and Catchpole duly missed it but fortunately it missed the stumps as well and was neatly taken behind the wicket by Oliver Lloyd. The same thing happened to the next two balls, while the third, and the last of the over, hit the batsman on the pad and bounced away for another leg-bye.

Andrew went away to help Mrs Ponsonby take Elvis to her car, a duty Jake positively refused to perform, and by the time he returned to the cricket, Catchpole, to everyone's relief, was still batting and the Animal was about to deliver the third ball of the second over. He looked to Andrew to be hardly less fast than the Jamaican but he was a good deal less accurate and this fourth delivery went wildly down the leg side for four byes.

"Better," said Jake. "Six on the board now."

The next two balls pitched closer to the stumps though not close enough to cause Catchpole to play them. The same, indeed, could have been said for the last ball of the over but unfortunately Catchpole chose to play it; or rather to flick at it with a sudden, convulsive movement like a demented fly-swatter. Later he would describe this shot as a square cut but whatever it was the ball took the

edge of the bat and was splendidly caught by Oliver Lloyd diving athletically to his right.

And so with the score 6 for three and Elvis retired hurt, Andrew went to the wicket, Jake's urgent instructions ringing in his ear: "Tell Henry to keep one end going, play his normal game. And you, well, get as many as you can while you can." Jake had said this somewhat tonelessly as if he had very little confidence in Andrew's ability to get any at all; his hopes were pinned almost entirely on Henry, the club's best defensive batsman. If Henry could just stay there, notching a few runs from time to time, while the others lashed out more in hope than expectation, well, last year's total of 31 might still not be beyond reach. To anything much better than that Jake simply did not aspire any longer.

Andrew passed on the captain's instructions to a grim and determined-looking Henry, who merely nodded grimly and determinedly and sketched out a few deadbat shots while he listened, and then Andrew went on to take his place at the bowler's end. The Animal glowered at him from his place at cover point.

But at this moment Andrew was hardly aware of the Animal for he had just noticed the umpire walking in sedately from his previous position at square leg. He had come, this umpire, with the visiting team and Andrew had hitherto not been aware of him at all; he had certainly not noticed that the man was bald and had an artificial leg.

"You!" Andrew said, in disbelief. "It's you!"

"What?" the umpire tried to look puzzled but succeeded only in looking shifty. "I don't know what you mean. We've never met before."

"Oh yes, we have! Well, no, we haven't. Not actually met, I mean. But you've been sticking to me like jam to a blanket. Last Sunday, remember? And Monday, with the ginger beard? And Thursday, with the M.C.C. tie? What the hell's it all about?"

"Ah." The umpire sounded disappointed. "Penetrated my disguises, did you? You must be a very perceptive man, Mr Weston. What was it gave me away? That beard

perhaps? Too ginger? I always had my doubts about that beard. Was that it then – the beard?"

"Well . . . Something like that. But what are you doing here, for God's sake? How did you get here?"

"Why, Mr Kaufman brought me in his car. Very nice car it is, too. One of those big Mercedes . . ."

"Never mind about that." Kaufman. Yes, of course – it had to be Kaufman. "I want to know what the devil you mean by spying on me like this."

While they had been talking the Jamaican fast bowler had been slowly disappearing into the middle distance towards the beginning of his run-up. The umpire said: "Well, this is hardly the time or place, I think . . ."

"Right," Andrew said. "Right. But I want a word with you later." He just had time to reflect that if all the people who wanted words with other people started talking simultaneously it was going to be like the Tower of Babel round here when the fast bowler went thundering past him, in a leaping, grunting, black and white blur of sheer menace.

The ball pitched, wickedly fast, on a perfect length and in line with the off stump. And Henry drove it with majestic ease between bowler and mid-off. The umpire was signalling a four before the ball had even reached the boundary.

"Steady, Henry, steady," said Andrew. Henry nodded.

The next ball, even faster than its predecessor and delivered with the aggressive resentment of a bowler who was not accustomed to being straight-driven by village cricketers, pitched short and bounced head-high. And Henry lay back and hooked it over the square-leg boundary.

"Henry, for Christ's sake, take it easy," Andrew said. But Henry took no notice for he had just embarked upon the most glorious innings of his life; the most glorious innings in the annals of the Martindale cricket club. With a square cut and a leg-glance he took two more fours off that over, reducing the bowler to baffled impotence, evoking congratulations on his strokeplay from Dowsett and Batchford and inducing a state close to cardiac arrest

in Jake who, torn between elation and anxiety, could hardly bear to watch.

But now it was Andrew's turn and the Animal was bowling to him.

If the last over to Henry had been like a club cricketer's fantasy, this one from the Animal to Andrew was a nightmare. To the batsman struggling to survive, not simply as a batsman but as a living person, it seemed that the bowler's intention was not to get him out but to knock him out, or even to kill him. The first ball, ignoring the formality of pitching anywhere at all, went straight from bowler's hand towards batsman's head like a bullet and Andrew only avoided it by leaping madly towards point. The second did pitch but much closer to the bowler than the batsman and Andrew got out of its way by dropping to the ground. The third and fourth, also short and rising head-high, were fortunately wide enough of the off stump for Andrew to leave them alone. For the fifth he prudently changed his guard from middle to leg stump but the ball, a fast full toss, followed him, being aimed at his legs. He evaded that one by skipping nimbly backwards in the direction of square leg. The last ball of the over was an exact replica of the first. Andrew tried to duck under it but tripped and flung his bat up desperately to protect his head. The ball struck the horizontal bat on the outside edge, soared over the wicket-keeper and, still rising, struck the top of the sight-screen.

The Animal gave a great roar of frustration as the umpire signalled the six.

Dowsett, who had been watching events with some horror and frequent exhortations to his bowler to calm down, now approached said bowler and asked: "Do you . . . do you always bowl like that?"

"Just finding the range," the Animal said. "I'll get him next over."

"Get him where exactly?" Dowsett asked. "On the head? On the throat? In the eye?"

"Haven't bowled much lately," the Animal said. "Length and direction are a bit off."

"I don't know why you bother to bowl at all," Dowsett

said. "Why don't you just pick the bloody ball up and club him to death with it?"

"Better next over," the Animal said.

"Very possibly," Dowsett said. "But I think you may have to wait a while for your next over."

That was in fact the end of the Animal's stint. He went back into the covers, his balaclava of discontent pulled low over his eyes, and skulked there for the rest of the morning. The Jamaican, too, was invited by his captain to have a rest after only one more over off which Henry, driving, cutting, pulling and hooking, scored fourteen runs.

Dowsett himself, bowling off-breaks, replaced the Animal and Batchford, medium pace, took over from the Jamaican. Andrew could make little of either of them. Normally he was a big-hitting batsman, not always pretty to watch but effective. Today, however, he was reduced to desperate defence, baffled equally by the spin and flight of Dowsett and the late swing of Batchford. Nor was he any more at ease when these two were replaced in their turn by other spinners and seamers.

But to Henry all bowling came alike. It was as if the spirit of Gilbert Jessop, wandering about in search of a game of cricket, had lighted upon Martindale and, fancying its chances on such a beautiful day, had taken temporary possession of Henry Tyson's body. At lunchtime Andrew, by dint of much scratching and scraping, had put together 20 runs, while Henry had scored 88. And with Martindale 120 for three, the two batsmen returned to the pavilion and an ovation from their team-mates. Of McCulper and Kaufman there was no sign, although the sound of alcohol being sloshed into glasses was audible from the small marquee, but Victoria had turned up. Andrew was relieved to see her for her presence served, at least temporarily, to take her sweating and ill-tempered husband's mind off the mayhem on which he was clearly bent.

In the home changing-room there was jubilation. "You should have seen old McCulper's face when Henry started laying into that West Indian," said Doug Polly, late order batsman, seam bowler and farm manager. "He couldn't

have looked sicker if someone had slipped a dog's turd into his sausage roll."

"We've got to keep it up, lads," Jake said. "We've got to keep it up." At that moment he was as happy as any man could be who had been run out off the first ball of the game and his smile faded only briefly even when Andrew asked after Elvis. "Oh, he's all right," Jake said. "Bloody ankle's not broken at all – just a bad sprain. Stupid little sod . . ."

Andrew, however, was not able to enjoy all this bonhomie for long because the army of Press men, reinforced by several latecomers, was massing threateningly around the pavilion and the feature writer, summoned from the *Sunday Journal* for an exclusive interview, was waiting to smuggle him out of the back door and take him to Henry's house for lunch. The pair of them left just as Jake had gathered the rest of the team around him for a tactics talk. "Now, listen, lads," he was saying, "when we get into the lunch tent we have one pint each, all right? And make it last. But keep getting drinks for the other buggers. Large ones – doubles, trebles, anything. They'll all be on the gin and tonics, so let's show 'em a little country hospitality. Soon as you see one of their lot with an empty glass, fill it . . . No, Dermot, you don't have to pay. McCulper's paying. It's his booze, so let *his* team get pissed on it . . . It's okay, Ron – there'll be plenty left for us after the game. The important thing is that when we go back out again after lunch I don't want to see one of the other lot able to stand up straight . . ." It wasn't easy being a captain, Andrew reflected; you had to think of everything.

Sue had brought Henry's car round to the back of the pavilion to collect Andrew and the feature writer. There was still, she said, no sign of Laura, either at home or in McCulper's marquee. Andrew was not entirely displeased: Laura, he thought, was just another in the increasing mob of people who would want a word with him later . . .

There was a salad lunch waiting at Sue's house and the feature writer, a plump and languid young man, conducted the interview while they ate, beginning with

what he doubtless conceived as a tactful question to put his subject at ease. "Did you really fancy that fat old stripper," he asked, "or were you just pissed . . . ?" Andrew was only about halfway through his version of the previous evening's events when it was time to return to the cricket.

He and his interrogator received a somewhat hostile reception from the rest of the Press gang, who had drunk a hearty lunch in the village pub, when they got back to the pavilion. "Whatever the *Journal*'s paying you, we'll pay more," they all cried in unison with the traditional skill and cunning of reporters experienced in extracting information from reluctant interviewees. But Andrew merely said, "No comment" and barged his way through to the changing-room.

Jake's lunchtime ruse, he noted as he and Henry walked out to resume their innings, did not appear to have worked, for McCulper's team seemed as alert and eager as ever. And yet, Andrew thought, as Dowsett bowled the first ball of the afternoon session to him, perhaps it had. For the ball was decidedly loose – overpitched and outside the off stump. Andrew smote it mightily over the bowler's head and into the trees for six. "Pitch it up, man, pitch it up!" yelled an irate McCulper, ignoring the fact that a ball pitched much further up would have landed behind the wicket-keeper.

Dowsett grinned wryly, polished the ball on his groin, and bowled again. The second delivery looped into the air just as its predecessor had done and Andrew took a step down the wicket to help himself to another six. But, alas, he had reckoned without the guile of a former England cricketer. This ball pitched a little shorter than he had expected and floated away from him. And while he was still flailing away, a yard out of his crease, Oliver Lloyd moved across neatly and swiftly and stumped him.

"Hard luck, Mr Weston," said the umpire with the artificial leg as Andrew trailed past him, head down, bat dragging on the ground, on his way to the pavilion where Jake was waiting to offer the traditional captain's sympathy. "Stupid twat," Jake said. "Fancy getting

stumped like that, second ball." Andrew mumbled apologetically and Jake added: "Thank Christ it was you got out, not Henry."

Henry, in fact, had made arrangements for just such a contingency as Andrew's early post-prandial dismissal. As the Press moved in repeating their vague offers of untold wealth for his exclusive story, Andrew ducked into the changing-room, out the back door and into Sue's car. He was back at her house to resume his interview with the young man from the *Sunday Journal* almost before he'd got his pads off.

And it was there, in Henry's home, that he spent the rest of the afternoon telling his story and having his photograph taken while Sue kept in touch with the progress of the game by telephone. The village was still doing well, she reported, because Roger, last Sunday's villain, had become today's minor hero, simply by doing what he always did – playing and missing. He was not scoring many runs but he was staying at the wicket by dint of playing the same shot at each ball, regardless of speed or spin, and missing all except the straight ones. Henry, meanwhile, continued to smite every kind of bowling impartially and was well past his hundred by the time Roger was finally dismissed, having had the misfortune to play at and actually touch a ball that was passing outside his off stump. Oliver Lloyd had taken the catch.

"Henry's never scored a century before," Sue said. "Isn't he clever?"

"By the way," Andrew said to the young man from the *Sunday Journal*, "how much am I getting paid for this exclusive story?"

The young man shrugged. "Didn't you fix that up with Henry?" He shook his head at such naivety. "Fuck all, I should imagine. Tough luck, that. The *Sun* would have paid you a small fortune. Oh well, I'd better get back to Town and do my stuff." He put his notebook in his pocket and stood up. "By the way, what did it feel like, that tit, when you grabbed it?"

"Blancmange," Andrew said.

The young man nodded. "Looked like blancmange, too."

Soon after the young man had left news came through that the Martindale innings had closed for 197, the last four wickets having fallen rapidly to the West Indian fast bowler. Henry had been left not out with 142. Sue, reporting all this, said that an early tea was now being taken and Andrew would be expected back at the ground in half an hour for the resumption of play.

"Do you know," she added, "Henry's was the highest score ever made by a Martindale batsman? Isn't that marvellous?"

"And you hardly saw any of it, did you? I am sorry; you could have watched it all if it hadn't been for me."

"Watched it?" Sue said, aghast. "Good God, I was glad of the excuse not to. Boring game, cricket."

From Laura there was still no word – presumably she had spent the whole day shopping – by the time Andrew returned to the ground to find that the lunchtime jubilation in the home team's changing-room had evaporated considerably. Henry, of course, was the local hero and he sat in a corner listening to the enthusiastic praise of his team-mates with the modest smile of one who knew damn well he was a hero and was anxious that nobody else should swiftly forget it. Every now and then as the compliments showed signs of dying away he would utter some such self-deprecating remark as, "Well, of course, I had a bit of luck . . ." and it would start all over again. "Luck? What do you mean, luck? There was no luck about it! Why that cover drive off old Batchford, when you got your fifty . . ."

Jake, however, while as generous as anyone about Henry's individual performance, was pessimistic about the team's total: 197, he said, would not be enough – it was the kind of score that Dowsett and Batchford between them could rattle up in a couple of hours. And if one, or even both, of them failed there was still plenty of quality batting in McCulper's team, what with all the Blues and near-Blues and Minor Counties players. No, the village was at least sixty runs short of a winning total . . .

"It's all bloody Elvis's fault," he said. "I was good for at least fifty today. I could feel it in my bones." The others murmured symphathetically, knowing that one day each of them would be dismissed early and unfortunately, feeling in their bones that they were good for fifty. The true beauty of cricket, the lure that makes the enthusiast carry on playing while he can still hold a bat is not so much the innings he has played as the innings he might have played – innings he might still play yet, given reasonable fortune, a decent pitch, an unbiased umpire and a partner who knows how to run between the wickets. Even Henry, who had that day come as close to playing the perfect innings as anyone in the Martindale side had ever dreamed of, would, when the euphoria had died down, begin to think of the runs he might have scored if only he hadn't hit that full toss from Batchford straight to the Animal at cover point instead of a little to his right and if only that idiot umpire with the artificial leg hadn't signalled four leg-byes when everyone on the field knew that Henry had actually got the faintest of touches to the ball with his delicate leg-glance and if only . . . And so it went. By the time he played again tomorrow he would be thinking of today's innings as his best *so far* but the real best was yet to come . . .

Dowsett and Batchford opened the innings for McCulper's team and it soon began to look as though Jake's prognostications would prove accurate. In the absence of the wife-ridden Phil, who would by now be having high tea with his mother-in-law in Leeds, Jake and Roger, both honest journeymen on the quickish side of medium, began the bowling for Martindale with Ron Kettle replacing Elvis behind the stumps. As a combination this was by no means successful. Dowsett and Batchford fell upon the bowling with relish and the urgency of men who were anxious to bring the proceedings to a satisfactory conclusion as quickly as possible and return to the convivial atmosphere of the beer tent; while Ron Kettle, though sharing Elvis's general inadequacy with the gloves, lacked that young man's dexterity with the pads, so that such deliveries as Dowsett

and Batchford chose to leave alone ran away virtually unimpeded by the wicket-keeper towards the boundary. In an hour McCulper's team had reached 89 for no wicket and was almost halfway home.

At this point Henry was brought on to bowl, which he did steadily enough without ever looking as if his earlier exploits with the bat would be matched by corresponding exploits with the ball. And yet it was Henry who, with the score at 103, took the first wicket. Batchford played a little early at a slower delivery which touched the shoulder of his bat and was caught by Ron Kettle – or rather it arced off the bat, struck the wicket-keeper in the throat and stayed there, jammed between his chin and his chest as he fell, gurgling, onto his back.

This brought the Animal to the wicket and he, having given a contemptuous glance at most of the field and a venomous one at Andrew, proceeded to show that he could hit a cricket ball as fiercely as he could butt referees by taking seventeen runs off the next two overs. He was still at the striker's end when Jake gave the ball to Andrew and said: "See if you can winkle him out."

The confidence with which he said this was somewhat marred by the way he sent all the fielders, bar two or three, to the boundary. In all honesty Andrew could not blame him: he had never felt less like bowling to anyone in his life while, conversely, he had never seen anyone who so obviously relished the prospect of being bowled to. The bat looked tiny in the Animal's huge hands as he crouched, oozing confidence and menace, waiting for the first delivery.

Andrew bowled it – not a bad one either, straight and on a pretty fair length. The Animal strode forward with a full swing of the bat, there was a sweet crack as he connected with the meat of the blade and then the ball was hurtling towards Andrew's face at about a thousand miles an hour. He ducked his head to one side and flung up his arms to protect himself. There was a searing pain in his left hand, followed by another in his right buttock as he staggered back and sat on the leg stump.

And when he had recovered a little the Animal was

walking away, glowering, to the pavilion, the ball was still in Andrew's left hand and Jake and the other two or three fielders within reach of the bowler's wicket were hammering him on the back and saying: "What a catch! My God, what a catch!" Andrew was not sure whether to be pleased or sorry, for the thought had occurred to him that the Animal would be even angrier with him now than he had been earlier.

Nevertheless, the score was 120 for two and one ball later it was 120 for three. The next man in, having been waiting in the beer tent for about an hour and a half for his turn to bat, had succeeded in doing to himself what Jake's lunchtime tactics had failed to do and arrived at the wicket quite considerably plastered. Even so, being a former Oxford Blue he might have overcome this handicap had not Andrew, running in at an angle, slipped on the same damp patch that had earlier brought about Elvis's downfall and lurched into the umpire with the artificial leg, bringing them both tumbling to the ground. The batsman greeted this impromptu knockabout turn with what Andrew regarded as quite excessive hilarity, doubling over, dropping his bat and slapping his thighs. Indeed he was still snuffling and chortling with suppressed laughter when Andrew finally did deliver the ball – a slow long-hop, as it turned out, which bounced twice, causing another onset of helpless hysteria in the batsman before coming to rest against the base of the middle stump and gently dislodging the off bail.

"Well bowled, Andrew, well bowled!" cried Jake with more enthusiasm than accuracy. "We've got 'em on the run!"

Meg and Claudia had appeared outside the main marquee, each with a glass of wine in her hand. Andrew waved to them and Meg waved back but Claudia simply glanced at him and then looked away.

"Come on, lads," Jake said. "On your toes – this is the breakthrough."

But Dowsett was still at the wicket and now the West Indian came in to join him. And the West Indian, who had been drinking nothing stronger than lemonade, was

not much given to mirth or playing over the top of long-hops. The only time he even smiled during the rest of that over was after he had driven the last two balls through the covers for four apiece.

The batsmen were back in control and within half an hour the score had reached 150, at which point Jake replaced Henry and bowled a maiden over, only the fourth of the innings so far. Then he summoned his two co-selectors, Andrew and Henry, for a conference.

"I'm going to give Dermot a bowl," he said.

"Oh, no – not bloody Dermot!" said Andrew.

"Well, why not?" Jake said, defiantly. "Henry and I are steady enough but we don't look much like taking wickets and you're bowling like a wanker." The enthusiasm he had shown at 120 for three had now been considerably tempered. "Besides, we've tried everyone else who can bowl."

"Well," Henry said, "if you're looking to get the game finished in one over, I suppose Dermot's your man. How many do they need to win – forty-eight? That's six sixes and twelve wides. I don't think it's ever been done before but Dermot could manage it."

"A fat lot of help you two are, I don't think," said Jake bitterly, closing the discussion and simultaneously beckoning the slight, jug-eared man from Limerick from his position at fine leg where, owing to the unpredictability of Ron Kettle behind the stumps, he had been serving more in the capacity of long-stop.

"Oh, no – not bloody Dermot!" said the rest of the team.

But Dermot's first over was, for Dermot, surprisingly steady. True, only one ball pitched close enough to the wicket to cause the batsman to play it (and Dowsett duly clipped it through the legside for two) but there were no actual wides. On the other hand, Dermot was bowling only at around medium pace and with no discernible spin whatsover.

"Put a bit of bloody zip in it, Dermot," Jake said at the end of the over. "You're not even turning the ball."

"Well, I'm bowling within myself, so I am," Dermot

said. "See, I thought I might be in for a longish spell here, so I'm saving the ear."

"Bugger the ear," said Jake. "This is no time to be saving the ear – give it everything you've got." He then proceeded to bowl his second successive maiden over to the West Indian.

So Dermot came up to bowl again and if Dowsett had known him better he would have been alerted by the bowler's tell-tale yelp of pain as his right arm brushed against his right ear. But Dowsett had never faced Dermot before and so as the ball, quicker than any Dermot had bowled yet, pitched about a foot and a half outside the leg stump he merely reflected that he had watched three of those go harmlessly by in the last over and prepared to do the same with this one. He was therefore left helpless and astonished as the ball turned, almost it seemed at right angles, and struck the middle stump. As the batsman walked slowly away, shaking his head, Dermot was surrounded by his delighted team-mates, slapping him on the back. His right ear was already turning pink.

"I knew it, I knew it!" Jake cried, exultantly. "When you hear Dermot give a little scream you know he's hit his ear and when he hits his ear you know he's spinning the ball."

With his next delivery Dermot yelped again. But to this one he must, inadvertently, have imparted top-spin (inadvertently for Dermot knew only the basic leg-break grip) because the ball simply bounced and went straight on, catching the top of the bat and lobbing up for a simple catch to the rector's brother-in-law who, substituting for Elvis, was fielding in the gully. The third ball, again accompanied by a yelp, pitched so far outside the leg stump that the umpire with the artificial leg was about to signal a wide when it turned even more prodigiously than the one that had dismissed Dowsett and hit the middle stump again.

And now McCulper's team was truly on the run, for Dermot – although, admittedly, sending down the occasional long-hop and full toss and sprinkling his overs with a goodish number of wides – was in one of his

unplayable moods. He took another wicket in his third over and one more in his fifth and McCulper's eleven was 176 for eight.

"What did I tell you?" Jake said to Henry. "What did I *tell* you? Look at that boy – he's bowling his bloody ear off." Dermot, pale of face and pale of hair, was indeed a curious sight by now because his left ear was white and his right ear was crimson.

"Yeah," Henry said a touch sourly for, much as he wanted the village to win, he was not at all keen, after playing the innings of a lifetime, to be relegated to the role of second hero by so unlikely a figure as Dermot. "He's all heart."

"Heart as big as his ear," Jake said. "We've got 'em now. We've really got 'em. God, I'm longing to see old McCulper's face when we beat them."

But the two batsmen currently at the wicket were in no mood to contemplate defeat. The West Indian set the example, taking no chances, waiting for the loose ball and watching the wides go by with a contented smile. In ones and twos and extras the score climbed steadily to 192 for eight, just five short of Martindale's total. There was nobody now in the pavilion, the changing-room or either of the marquees. They were all standing on the boundary, soothing drinks in hand, sharing in varying degrees the tension that was tangibly building up out there in the middle.

Dermot bowled again, yelping louder than ever, his arm dealing his ear a positively brutal blow, the ball fizzing down fast and straight, pitching middle and leg, turning sharply towards the off . . . The West Indian drove at it, mistimed it and it shot away into the hands of Roger at first slip. Into his hands – and straight out again.

Roger went down on his knees in shame, his hands over his face. Dermot grinned sadly and stroked his ear. The West Indian puffed out his cheeks in relief and played the shot again, the way he should have played it the first time and, there being no ball to hamper him, apparently got it right. Jake, fielding at mid-off, remembered, distraught though he was, that it was a captain's

duty to bolster the morale of his team and, turning his back so that the offending fielder would not notice his displeasure, roared his "Fuck that stupid Roger!" at the empty outfield.

Now it was Dermot once again – running in, bowling, yelping . . . The ball pitched middle and off this time, turned again; and again the West Indian drove and again the ball caught the edge of the bat and flew away fast and low to Roger's right. And this time Roger, diving, held the catch. Jubilation on the field and jubilation mixed equally with anxiety off it.

Oliver Lloyd came calmly to the wicket – the score 192 and he the last man in. From the boundary McCulper yelled: "Take it easy, Oliver. For God's sake, take it easy. There's plenty of time."

Jake re-arranged his field, pushing Andrew out deeper at long-on, moving Roger wider at slip, shifting the rector's brother-in-law from gully to point, beckoning to Henry at mid-wicket . . . "Come in, Henry – forward short leg."

"Forward short leg?" Henry said incredulously. "With Dermot bowling? No bloody way." He stayed where he was and Jake himself moved in to forward short leg.

Oliver surveyed the field, checked his guard and nodded to the umpire, who said, "Play" and Dermot ran in and delivered a long-hop. Oliver took two quick, neat steps down the wicket and swung his bat cleanly. The ball, driven sweetly off the meat of the blade, soared up and up and up – and towards Andrew out there at long-on.

He moved back and back until he was almost on the boundary's edge and still the ball was climbing towards him. Behind him there was a movement, someone stepping out from behind the sight screen . . . the Animal – with a stump in his hand . . .

Andrew turned his attention back to the ball. It was falling now, bright red against the blue of the late afternoon sky. He moved a little to his left, hands up just above his head, waiting . . . and he heard the Animal creeping up behind him, muttering: "Now I'm going to get you, Weston."

11

Some time later – and he never did discover how much later – Andrew came round to find himself lying on a trestle table in McCulper's marquee. He was aware, vaguely, of a small group of people in the background and, vividly, of the village doctor leaning over him and saying: "Well, I think he'll be all right now. A bit of concussion, I expect. He ought to take it easy for a couple of days but I don't think there's any real harm done." The doctor slapped him lightly on the cheek. "Most amazing bit of fielding I've ever seen," he said, and chuckled and went away.

Andrew tried to sit up but the effort hurt his head abominably and made him feel dizzy, so he groaned and lay down again. When he opened his eyes once more Henry was standing over him. "Hello, Henry," he said in a weak voice. Henry just grunted. He looked sort of inscrutable.

"Wha . . . what happened?" Andrew asked. "Did he hit me? Did he hit me with the stump?"

"What the hell are you talking about? Why should anybody hit you with a stump?" Henry glanced over his shoulder at the small group behind him. "I think he's delirious."

"Not delirious – barmy," a voice said. "He's always been barmy, if you ask me." It was McCulper's voice.

Andrew tried raising his head again; it still made him feel a little dizzy but it didn't hurt so much this time. Now he could see the people behind Henry – McCulper was there, of course, and the Kaufmans; Victoria and the Animal; Oliver Lloyd and, at last, Laura. She was standing beside Oliver and looking steadily at her husband,

though not with the uxorial concern that he might have hoped for, considering what had happened – whatever it was that had happened. Memory began to come back.

"Did we . . . did we win?" he asked, anxiously. There was a snort from McCulper, the kind of snort that could have denoted anything. To Andrew it sounded unpleasantly like a combination of triumph and derision.

"Oh," he said. "Then I . . . then I didn't catch that ball?"

Henry looked down upon him, still inscrutable and even stern. "Depends what you mean by catch," he said. "If you mean 'Did I catch it on the head?', then the answer is Yes, though I'd hardly have thought it was necessary to tell you that. If, on the other hand, you mean 'Did I catch it in my hands?', the answer is No. As a matter of fact," he added, gesturing towards the Animal, "he caught it. Unfortunately he wasn't playing for our side and as he was about six feet on the wrong side of the boundary at the time, there wasn't a lot in it for us. Mind you, I have to admit you helped. If it wasn't for your header the ball would never have reached him."

"Oh, God." Gingerly Andrew put a hand to his face; there was a lump just on his hairline, about the size of a turkey's egg. It hurt a lot when he touched it.

"Well, don't feel too bad about it," Henry said, deep sarcasm in his voice. "You did practically everything right – got nicely into position and all that. The only tiny thing you did wrong, the only minimal omission that the purists might object to, was that you forgot to bring your hands together as the ball came down. Hit you a lovely wallop, it did. You could hear the 'clunk' all over the ground – well, I don't suppose you heard it but the rest of us did. You know the expression 'he went down as if poleaxed'? Well, that was you, Andrew, old son. By the time we got to you your eyeballs were spinning like that Indian bloke's googly last year and just for a minute I thought your brains were spurting out of your ears." Henry sighed. "No such luck, though. You idiot! That was the world's easiest dolly of a catch. Any bookmaker would have given odds that it was simpler to hold it

than to miss it." Another sigh. "Of course, the bookies don't know you, do they?"

Andrew gave a little moan as shame and remorse swept over him. "Henry, what can I say except . . . except I'm sorry? Tell Jake, will you? Tell Jake I'm sorry?"

"Jake?" Henry said. "I wouldn't so much as mention your name to Jake. He hates you even worse than he hates Elvis." He raised his hands and shook them in exasperation. "It wouldn't have been so bad if you'd just missed the bloody thing! It probably wouldn't even have reached the boundary. But, no, not you. You had to play football with it, didn't you? You had to head it first bounce over the line."

Andrew squirmed in his misery. "Henry, I've said I'm sorry. I didn't do it deliberately! For God's sake, nobody wanted to win that game more than . . ." He stopped, propped himself up on one elbow, groaned, fell back again and all this while staring intently into Henry's still inscrutable face. "What did you say?"

"What? What do you mean, 'What did I say'?"

Andrew thought carefully before asking his next question; it seemed to him to be possibly the most important question he had ever asked in his life. "Did you say that I headed it first bounce over the line?"

Henry nodded. "Yes, I did. And that blighter there caught it on the half volley."

"So," Andrew said, still speaking slowly and carefully, "it didn't go for six, it went for four. But they needed six, in which case . . . in which case it wasn't the winning hit?"

"No," Henry said, gravely. "No, it wasn't the winning hit." And then slowly his stern, inscrutable expression began to break up into a smile; a smile that started as a mere twitch at the corners of his mouth and thereafter gained confidence and grew and grew until it threatened to split his face in half at which point he leapt up and punched the air with both fists and emitted a roar of ecstasy. "And the beauty of it is, they never did make the winning hit. We beat them! Do you hear that, Andrew, we won! We beat them, Andrew, we actually beat them! We won!"

In his still groggy state, Andrew could hardly take this in. "Beat them? Won? How? How did we beat them, how did we win?"

Henry was still leaping and punching and clapping his hands and doing an intricate little victory dance but at last he stopped all this and said: "Dermot. That bloody Dermot . . . Look, you'd given them four, right? They still need one to tie, two to win, right? Okay. Well, up comes Dermot and bowls a ball you simply wouldn't believe. I mean, it was so wide old Oliver didn't even bother to play it and then suddenly . . . Well, Dermot says he pitched it in the rough but if you ask me he turned it off the square leg umpire's boot. Either way it came back about half a mile and took the middle stump. Oh, Andrew, it was beautiful! I wish you'd seen it. I mean, the spin on that ball . . . You could hear Dermot scream in the next county, he'd spun it so much."

Andrew could hardly believe it, just as Henry had predicted. "Can this be true? You're not saying it just to make me feel better? We really did win?"

"Yes!" Henry cried, exultantly. "Of course, we bloody won. Why should I want to make *you* feel better? We really and truly won by one run and it's all down to Dermot." This latter reflection sobered him instantly, as the galling realisation struck him that despite his own heroic innings this would always be known as Dermot's match. Without Henry, Dermot would have had no target to bowl at but in cricket memories are short. Henry had performed his marvels ages ago, before tea; Dermot's had come later, at the very end of the game. Henry might be remembered as the man who had saved the match but Dermot would always be known as the man who had won it.

Half sensing this, Andrew said: "We couldn't have done it without you, Henry."

And Henry, mollified, said: "You played your part, too, despite dropping that daft catch but . . ." The sportsman in him came to the surface and with an admiration that was only half grudging he added: "You've got to hand it to old Dermot, though. He gave it everything

he'd got. I mean, you should see his spinning ear, it's . . . well, it's sort of crimson and all swollen up. The poor devil's got an ice-pack on it." The wide, face-splitting smile came back. "What the hell, we won, didn't we? We bloody well won and nothing else matters. Listen, I can't hang around here talking to you. I've got an urgent appointment with about a gallon of beer and I don't intend to be late. See you soon." And he danced out of the marquee chanting, "We are the champions, we are the champions."

Henry's exit was accompanied by another snort from McCulper but this, Andrew noted with deep pleasure, was not at all a happy snort. It was, on the contrary, the snort of a very disappointed man.

It had hardly died away when the umpire with the artificial leg came in and said: "Are you feeling better now, Mr Weston?"

"What?" Andrew said, struggling out of a maelstrom of emotions in which elation at his team's victory vied with grief and humiliation at the memory of his own dropped catch. "Yes. Yes, I am, thanks. I . . . Hey, hang about. Listen, who the hell are you?"

"Ah, of course. We haven't been introduced yet. Allow me." He gave Andrew a business card. It said: "Raymond Spade – Private Investigator."

"A private eye?" Andrew said. "Yes, well, I'd more or less guessed that. But what I don't understand is why you've been snooping around after me."

"Nothing personal, Mr Weston," Spade said. "Merely in the line of business."

"A bloody cheek nevertheless." Andrew raised his head, wincing, to appeal to the group assembled gravely at the foot of the trestle table. "Don't you think it's a bloody cheek – an intrusion on my privacy?" But if they did think that, none of them said so and he was not surprised. He had hardly expected much support from that lot.

Laura stepped forward and stood by his side, looking down at him sadly. "It's no good blustering now, Andrew," she said. "I know all about you. I know about

that girl, Claire, last Sunday and I know you tried to rape Victoria."

"I did *not* try to rape Victoria! How can you believe that?" He turned towards the one-legged private eye. "You, what's your name, Shovel – did you tell my wife I tried to rape Victoria?"

"Spade," Spade said, shaking his head. "No, sir, I did not. That allegation came from the young lady's husband."

"Him?" Andrew pointed towards the scowling Animal. "Am I to be condemned on the word of Neanderthal Man? Victoria . . . Victoria, please – tell them . . ."

"All I said in my report," Spade said, "was that you spent a considerable time alone with the young lady in her house before her husband came home. Now you can't deny that, Mr Weston, can you?"

The Animal joined the gathering around the table. Andrew had the feeling of inimical forces crowding in on him and none more inimical than this blue-jowled creature with the angry little eyes. "You're a loathsome swine, Weston," the Animal said. "Forcing your foul, drunken self on a girl like Victoria, frightening her to death."

In the background Victoria lowered her eyes demurely and tried to look like the kind of girl who would be frightened to death by amorous advances from someone like Andrew. She clutched her handbag close against her groin, her head drooped on its slim neck and her toes were slightly turned in. To the Animal, no doubt, the pose was virginal; to Andrew she looked like a woman who had probably consumed two men like him before breakfast.

"If you ask me," the Animal said.

"Well, I'm not asking you," Andrew said. "Look, run away and amuse yourself, will you? Rip a phone book in half or something." He was fairly confident that even the Animal wouldn't strike a recumbent man with a lump the size of a turkey's egg on his head. But for a second or two it looked as though he had misjudged his man, for the Animal came a step closer, snorting.

"David," Victoria said. "No, David." The Animal stopped obediently and Andrew, emboldened, said: "Why don't you take him outside, Victoria? Throw him a bit of raw meat." This time it really did look as if he had gone too far for the Animal gave a kind of howl of rage and it was only Victoria's restraining hand and soothing, "Now, now, David," that prevented him from falling upon Andrew and smiting him hip and thigh.

Andrew said: "Christ, this is getting like an inquisition. Everyone hurling accusations at me and nobody listening to my side of the story. It's not fair. It's just not bloody fair, I mean – Laura, how do you know, how does this rotten snooper know that anything at all happened in that girl's flat last Sunday? You weren't there – nobody was there."

"Good point, Mr Weston," said Spade, with an appreciative nod. "Very good point . . . Oh, by the way, I'd be grateful if you would not refer to me as a 'snooper'. It's something we're rather sensitive about in the profession. We . . ." He noticed the flush of exasperation in Andrew's cheeks and went on hurriedly: "But to answer your question well, yes, I have to admit that we only have circumstantial evidence. If you'll permit me . . ." From his jacket underneath the white umpire's coat he produced a notebook and opened it. "Yes, here it is. Last Sunday. Well, I observed the party of the first part – that's you, Mr Weston – accompanied by the party of the second part . . ."

"Oh, get on with it, man," growled McCulper.

"Yes. Well . . . I observed you both going into the flat and, as you know, Mr Weston, I observed you coming out at which time you were tieless and your shirt was unbuttoned to the waist, while the young lady was clad only in an extremely diaphanous housecoat. You embraced warmly at her door and . . ."

"All right," Andrew said. "All right."

"It's no good, is it, Andrew?" Laura said. "You can't bluff your way out of this. I'm leaving you, Andrew. I want a divorce. Daddy was quite right – I should never have married you in the first place."

"You want a divorce?" Andrew said, incredulously. "You want a divorce because your father says so?"

Laura hesitated. "No. The truth is I'm in love with Oliver. We want to get married."

"Oliver? That bloody grave robber?" Enlightenment came upon him. "That's where you were last night, isn't it? You were with Oliver. You spent the night with Oliver."

Now Oliver took his place round the trestle table. "I'm sorry, Andrew, I'm very sorry that you had to learn about it like this. But the fact is we did spend the night together. All I can say is that it . . . it wasn't intended."

"Wasn't intended? What do you mean it wasn't intended? How do you have an accidental fuck?"

Oliver said: "I mean, it wasn't premeditated. It just . . . it just happened. Laura was very upset because it was only an hour or so since she was given Mr Spade's report and, well, I tried to comfort her and . . . well . . . Look, if it's any consolation, it was the first time."

"The first time is the worst," Andrew said. "After that it doesn't matter if it's the hundred and first." He felt shocked, humiliated, guilty, angry. To Laura he said: "Anyway, if you've been having it away with Oliver I could divorce you. What do you think of them apples, eh?"

She shrugged. "As you wish. I don't mind either way – just so long as there's a divorce at the end of it. I'm really serious about this, Andrew, and not just because of what you've been up to this week but because, oh, it hasn't been working, our marriage, not for a long time. This week has simply been the clincher."

Andrew, propped up now on his elbows, glanced bitterly at Kaufman. "I must say you're taking this pretty calmly, Charles."

"Me?" Kaufman said, surprised. "Why shouldn't I? What's it got to do with me?"

"It's got everything to do with you!" Andrew cried. "You told the Animal about me and Victoria."

"I did not!" said Kaufman.

"Yes, you did!" said Andrew.

"He did not!" said the Animal. "It was Spade here who told me. Said he was acting on the instructions of his employer. Charles told me about the cricket match, invited me to play. On your father-in-law's behalf. Didn't say a word about Victoria. It was Spade who told me about . . ."

Andrew sighed, wearily. "Yes, I've got that. Anyway it amounts to the same thing. But you knew, Charles. You knew all right. Besides, what about those photographs of me and Caroline? They must have come as a bit of a shaker, didn't they? Or was Caroline telling the truth when she said that you didn't care what . . ." Too late he saw that Caroline, pale and frightened, was shaking her head vigorously, her finger to her lips.

"What photographs?" Kaufman said. "Caroline, what's he . . . ? Good God, you don't mean you've been having a go at Caroline as well? What kind of a man are you? Are you . . . are you quite insatiable?"

Andrew said, puzzled: "Come off it, Charles. Christ, you're the one who started all this. Don't try to play the innocent, for God's sake. I mean, I've no idea why you should have done it but it was you who set Shovel on to me . . ."

"Spade," said Spade. "Not Shovel – Spade."

"I had nothing to do with it!" Kaufman cried. "I admit I co-opted David here into Arthur's team but only because I'd heard they were a man short and I knew David was a good cricketer. And I brought Spade along today because Arthur asked me to. But I'd never even met Spade until this morning. I . . . Arthur, tell him." He looked around wildly. "Caroline? Where are you going, Caroline? Stay here. I want to know about those photographs." And taking Caroline by the arm he led her to the back of the marquee and began to question her fiercely.

So at last McCulper, who hitherto had been watching proceedings with grim but mostly silent satisfaction, took his place in the limelight. "Very well. I've nothing to hide. Yes, if you must know, it was I who hired Mr Spade to . . . er . . . to investigate you. I have no regrets and I make no apologies. It was a father's duty."

To Laura Andrew said: "Did you know about this?" She shook her head, looking embarrassed – for her father rather than herself.

"In that case," Andrew said angrily, to McCulper now, "what the hell did you mean by it? A father's duty? You pompous old twit. It was none of your bloody business."

"Don't talk to me like that!" McCulper roared. That day's whisky had turned his cheeks and eyeballs an identical shade of furious red. "I always had my doubts about you . . . No, not doubts – certainties. I knew from the start that you were the wrong man for my Laura. I told her . . . God knows I told her . . . 'Don't marry him,' I said. 'He's a philanderer . . .'"

"I'm not a bloody philanderer," Andrew said. Everyone seemed to be calling him a philanderer these days.

"The evidence would seem to prove otherwise." McCulper was calmer now that he was back to dealing with apparent facts rather than questions of morality, his or anyone else's. "Especially your behaviour this week, what with that girl – whatever her name is – on Sunday and Victoria and Caroline . . . I'm sorry about Caroline. I was hoping to spare Charles that information but now you've let the cat out of the bag – hardly the act of a gentleman, I may add . . ."

"It was hardly the act of a gentleman to employ someone to spy on your own son-in-law," Andrew yelled at him. "And anyway how long's it been going on? You're not going to tell me that by sheer coincidence Long John Silver there started following me about last Sunday, of all days?"

McCulper looked away and for a moment he seemed a little confused. "I've been employing him for some time. I . . . er . . . I had my reasons."

"What reasons? Before this week there was nobody at all, and nothing at all except a couple of times with Caroline. And I'm damn sure *she* didn't tell you about that."

"Never mind," McCulper said, fortifying himself with more Scotch. "I had my reasons and I had my sources of information. Let's leave it at that."

Andrew sat up, moaning as a shaft of pain shot through his head. "No, I will not leave it at that . . ." But Laura interposed herself between him and McCulper, saying: "Look, Andrew, forget it. I'm sorry about the way things happened, about Mr Spade. Daddy shouldn't have done that. But it doesn't really make much difference, you know, because I'd have left you soon in any case. Ever since you quit Daddy's firm we seem to have had less and less in common, while Oliver and I have lots in common and . . ."

"But what about the boys?" Andrew said. "How are they going to feel?"

Laura hesitated. Then she said gently, sadly: "Do you really think they'll miss you?"

He took a moment, thinking about it. "No," he said at last. He was not at all sure that he would even miss them. He didn't really know them; he never had known them. From the start McCulper had always stood between him and them, shielded them from him and from anything he had to offer them, even love. "No. They've always got their grandfather, haven't they?" he said bitterly. McCulper smiled slightly and Andrew hated him then more fiercely than he would have thought it possible to hate anyone.

Laura said: "You can see them whenever you like, of course. In a strange way it might . . . it might be better now. You might get to know them better when there's just you and them, away from here . . ."

For a while they were all silent. Then across the marquee Kaufman said: "You bitch!" and Caroline started to cry. Kaufman strode over to the trestle table and glared down at Andrew. "I've got some news for you. You're not suspended – you're fired!" And to McCulper he said: "I'm leaving now, Arthur. I hope you'll forgive me but, in the circumstances . . ."

"Of course." McCulper laid a soothing, sympathetic hand on Kaufman's shoulder. "Charles, I'm deeply sorry. I tried to spare you but, alas, it was out of my hands."

Kaufman nodded, emotionally, and laid his own hand on McCulper's shoulder and this touching tableau was

only broken when the flap of the marquee was shoved aside and Claire burst in among them. She looked around quickly and went straight to Spade. "I know you, Peg-Leg," she said. "You were following me around the supermarket last week, weren't you? And the week before that you were lurking about outside the hairdresser's."

"Madam, I . . ." Spade looked helplessly towards McCulper while everyone else stared in amazement at Claire.

"Claire!" Andrew said.

"So that's Claire," Laura and Oliver said in unison and Laura added, a touch grudgingly: "She's awfully pretty, isn't she?"

Claire grabbed Spade by the sleeve and whirled him round so that both of them were facing McCulper at whom she now levelled a small, accusing finger. "That bastard put you up to it, didn't he? God, I should have realised when Andrew phoned and asked if I knew a man with an artificial leg. But I didn't make the connection – not then. It was only the other night, at Victoria's, that I began to put two and two together. And then, of course, it all became marvellously clear yesterday afternoon when dear, loving Arthur called and dropped his little bombshell. I . . . Andrew, I'm sorry I accused you of ruining my life. It wasn't you at all – it was Arthur."

"Arthur?" said Andrew

"Daddy?" said Laura.

"Finally, this morning, when I got that letter . . ."

"Letter?" said Laura and Andrew together. "What letter?"

Beneath his whisky flush McCulper had turned quite pale. Claire swung away from him and addressed herself to his daughter and son-in-law. "You didn't know? Well then, let me tell you. Dear, charming, adorable Arthur here has had old Hopalong Cassidy sneaking around after me for weeks."

"No, no," Andrew said, shaking his head firmly. "You're quite wrong. He's been sneaking around after *me*. Why on earth should he be following you?"

Claire turned back to McCulper. "Will you tell them,

Arthur darling?" she purred. "No, you won't, will you? Then I shall tell them."

"Now look here," McCulper said, hoarsely.

"Shut up, Arthur." Again she turned her back on him, the better to address the rest of the company. "Let me introduce myself – I am Arthur's girlfriend. No, correction – I *was* Arthur's girlfriend. Oh, he was ever so sweet to me – set me up in a little flat rent-free and occasionally he'd take me on trips abroad and two or three nights a week he'd come round to get his rocks off. Wouldn't you, Arthur, darling? But then, a few weeks ago, I began to sense that he was growing a little bit tired of me. A girl notices these things, you know. Just the odd hint here and there like, I mean, he stopped insisting that I wore the suspender belt and tart's shoes he bought me in Soho . . ."

"Claire, for God's sake!" McCulper moaned.

"Shut up, Arthur. But, of course," she said to the others, "he wasn't man enough to break it off. Oh no, not Arthur. Couldn't face the responsibility, you see. A *real* man would have said, 'Look, this isn't working any more, let's call it a day,' but that's not for Arthur. It would have put him in the wrong and he never likes to be in the wrong. So you know what he did, the creepy old bastard? He set that other creepy bastard on to me, to see if I was two-timing him."

"And were you?" Andrew asked after a pause.

"No! Well, not until last Sunday anyway. You see, he was supposed to come round to my place on the Friday night but he didn't turn up. Well, I mean . . . there I was wearing the suspenders and the tart's shoes and the frilly black knickers – all his favourite toys – and he just didn't show. Not even a phone call. I was *livid*. And I was even more livid when he didn't even call on the Saturday. So . . . when I saw you at that party, Andrew, I thought, 'Well now, this is where little Claire gets some of her own back . . .'"

"You knew who I was then?" Andrew said.

"Of course."

"So when you were screwing me you were really

screwing him? Yes, well, thanks a lot. It gives a man confidence, that sort of knowledge."

Claire spread her hands apologetically. "It *was* a bit naughty, I suppose, but well, you know, a woman scorned and all that. Mind you, I had no idea there were private eyes all over the place, thick as autumn leaves. Dear, darling Arthur didn't even tell me that when he finally came round on Monday. Actually, he didn't say anything much – didn't do anything either, just sat and kind of sulked. A *charming* evening it was. No, he didn't say a dicky-bird until his sweet little phone call yesterday when he read out old Baldy's report. *Such* a report it was, too – what time you and I went into my flat, what time you left, what I was wearing, what you were wearing, the lipstick on your ear lobe . . . oh, it was all there. And Arthur said he was awfully disturbed and he'd have to review the situation. Then you phoned, Andrew, and I'm afraid you caught the fall-out."

"Why is it," Andrew murmured reflectively, to nobody in particular, "that when the shit hits the fan I'm always standing underneath?"

Claire, ignoring him, went on: "This morning was the clincher, though. That's when I got Arthur's letter. You wouldn't *believe* the letter he sent me. Well, I'll read it to you." She took an envelope from her handbag and from the envelope she produced a short, typewritten letter. "It says, 'Dear Miss Worsley . . .' lovely, warm greeting to your mistress, don't you think? . . . 'Dear Miss Worsley, This is to inform you regretfully that our association must come immediately to an end. The documentary evidence that was recently placed before me proves incontrovertibly that your interests now lie elsewhere and it is evident that there would be no further benefit for either of us were our association to continue . . .' Isn't that gorgeous? Isn't that the sort of letter you tie in pink ribbon and keep for ever? Anyway, it goes on . . . No. No, I won't bore you with all that. What he goes on to say is that he's giving me three months' notice to quit the flat and he enclosed a cheque for £1,000 for all my trouble. Can you credit that? I mean, it's positively insulting,

giving me a cheque for £1,000. Any decent hooker could make that by turning a few tricks and I've given him the best part of a year!"

McCulper was slumped into a chair, his hands over his face.

"Hardly the act of a gentleman, Arthur," Andrew said.

"You cow!" McCulper said, his voice shaky with rage.

Claire blew him a kiss. "I love you, too, darling."

Andrew turned his attentions to Spade. "All right, Shovel, let's see if I've got this straight. You were hired originally to spy on Miss . . . Worsley? Worsley, yes. And then when you told Mr McCulper that I'd turned up at her flat he thought he'd kill two birds with one stone by having you follow me as well?"

"Well, I cannot speak for my employer's motives, Mr Weston," said Spade, "but essentially, yes, that's what happened."

McCulper suddenly leapt from his chair, two bright red spots of anger on his otherwise dead-white face. "I'll fix you, you bitch," he said, waving an index finger at Claire. "If you think you can . . ."

But at this point there was another interruption. Wraith-like from the shadows at the back of the marquee stepped the figure of Mrs McCulper. How long she had been there nobody knew and nobody would ever know. But clearly she had been there long enough.

"I'm Arthur's wife," she said to Claire. "Are you telling the truth, my dear?"

"You bet," said Claire. "Look, I'm awfully sorry, Mrs McCulper. I had no idea . . ."

"Oh, don't apologise, my dear. Please don't apologise. Let me ask you a question – would you be prepared to make everything you've just said even more public than it already is?"

"What do you mean?" Claire asked, puzzled.

"Well, would you say it in a court? For example, a divorce court? I know it's not necessary any longer to bring up such details in a divorce action but, assuming

it *did* become necessary, assuming, let us say, that an amicable agreement couldn't be reached, would you be prepared to give your story in evidence?"

Claire thought about it. "What's in it for me?"

"Oh, there would be quite a lot, I imagine. A lot more than £1,000 anyway. In fact, I think there could be a lot in it for both of us."

"Mother!" Laura cried, aghast.

"Jesus Christ!" said McCulper.

"I think I get your drift," said Claire. "You'd like all the details, would you? I mean, the suspender belt, the frilly knickers, the tart's shoes and one or two other little idiosyncracies that I haven't even started to mention yet?"

"Oh, yes, all that," said Mrs McCulper. "As much as possible."

Claire nodded. "It would be my pleasure."

Mrs McCulper turned to her husband. "This is truly a red-letter day, Arthur. We're going to have a double divorce in the family. Isn't that exciting?"

McCulper said, wildly: "Alice, please, you don't mean this. You don't know what you're saying!"

"Oh, yes I do, Arthur. I'd have left you years ago but I know you only too well. If I'd walked out without any reason, other than the fact that I hated you, I wouldn't have got a penny from you, would I? But now . . . well, I think *everybody*, especially the newspapers, would be interested in what Miss Worsley has to say. Still, you think about it, dear, and in a day or two my solicitor will be in touch with your solicitor."

"What about my solicitor?" Claire said. "Or shall I use yours?"

"Whatever you prefer, my dear," Mrs McCulper said, comfortably. "Arthur will pay. And now I think it might be a good idea if you and I went off for a little chat. Would you like that? Over a nice cup of tea?"

"Make that gin," said Claire, "and you're on."

They linked arms and went off together and at the entrance to the marquee Mrs McCulper looked back and said: "Oh, by the way, Arthur. I think you'd better stay

at Laura's for a bit. I'll pack a bag for you and leave it in the porch."

"Alice!" McCulper cried. "Alice, come back!" But she and Claire had gone.

There was a lengthy and embarrassed silence after the two woman had left. Then Kaufman said, clearing his throat gruffly: "Well, I'll . . . I'll be off then, Arthur."

"Yes," McCulper said, staring at his own shoes as if he had never seen such things before and was trying to work out what they were. "Yes."

Kaufman went out. Caroline said: "Charles!" but he ignored her.

"Mr Kaufman," Spade called after him. "Mr Kaufman . . ." But Kaufman ignored him, too. "There goes my lift," Spade said, sadly. "How do I get home now?"

The Animal, who for some time had been wearing the bemused frown of a man who had only the faintest inkling of what was going on about him, took Victoria by the arm. "We'd better go as well. Can't say I begin to understand all this but I'd rather like to get away from here."

"Yes," she said. "Yes, let's go. Caroline, can we drop you anywhere?" Caroline, still weeping, snuffled affirmatively into her handkerchief. Spade said: "Would you mind giving me a lift, too?"

"You?" Caroline said viciously, through her handkerchief. "Get stuffed!"

"No, please, don't take that attitude. I was only doing my job . . ." He hurried after them, bleating, as they left the marquee.

There was more silence. Andrew lay back on the trestle table and closed his eyes. After a while Laura said: "Well, there's not much more to say really, is there? Not for the moment. Perhaps we'd better go, too." When nobody responded she said: "Oliver?" Oliver nodded. Laura went to her father and took his hand. "Daddy . . . Come along, Daddy. I'll take you home with me. We can pick up your things from The House later." Finally she turned to Andrew. "Well . . . goodbye, Andrew. I . . . oh dear,

this is terribly awkward. I mean, what's the next step? I suppose . . ."

". . . your solicitior will be in touch with my solicitor," Andrew said without opening his eyes. "Only trouble is, right now your solicitor *is* my solicitor. I expect we'll be able to work it out."

"It's a funny business, divorce, isn't it?"

"Hilarious. No doubt we'll get used to it."

Laura and Oliver, one on either side, took McCulper away. He walked slowly, like an invalid, and he seemed to have aged a great deal in the last fifteen minutes or so.

"I hope you three will be very happy together," Andrew called after them and immediately regretted the cheapness of what he had said.

At last he was alone. He lay back again, closed his eyes again and reflected upon the horrific sequence of events that had taken place in such a short space of time. He had lost his wife, he had lost his job, but curiously, the most vivid image in his mind at that moment was to do with the cricket match – an image of the bright red ball hurtling down towards him out of the blue sky as he waited on the boundary . . .

Henry's voice said: "Are you all right?"

He opened his eyes. "What? Oh, yes, yes I'm fine. Look, I'm sorry about the catch."

"Oh, well. It's over now, no use agonising about it. What I came to say was that there's a good old piss-up developing out there and are you going to join us? I mean, do you feel up to it?"

Andrew thought about it. "Why not?" There didn't seem to be much else to do. "Give me a few minutes, okay?"

"Okay." Henry turned to leave and paused and said: "Oh, by the way. Bill Callow – the editor of the *Sunday* – is very chuffed with the interview you did. He says you came out of it all smelling of roses. I find that hard to believe personally but there you are. Anyway, Bill asked me to ask you if you'd like to stand in as guest TV critic for a bit."

"TV critic? Me?" Andrew said. "Be a nice gimmick for

them, wouldn't it? The mad rapist of TV having a go at other people on TV."

Henry shrugged. "A gimmick? Well, if you want to be cynical about it – to say nothing of accurate – yes, it would. But at least it would give you something to do while you're suspended."

"I'm not suspended any more," Andrew said. "I'm fired."

"Even better then. The TV job's vacant, as a matter of fact, so if you fancy it and you're any good at it, it could become permanent – or as permanent as anything is in Fleet Street."

"All right," Andrew said, making a quick decision. "I'll do it."

"Fine. I'll tell Bill that you can start at once. Oh, and before you agree on a fee, have a word with me. Bill will screw you rigid if he can."

"Thanks, Henry," Andrew said.

"What are friends for?" Henry asked, rhetorically, and went away again.

Andrew stopped him just before he stepped out to join the village revelry. "Talking of fees," Andrew said, "how much am I getting for the interview I did this afternoon?"

Henry paused and looked back with an air of puzzled innocence. "Fee? I didn't think there was any fee involved. It was sort of between mates, wasn't it?"

"Hey, come on," Andrew said. "The *Sun* and the *Daily Star* and all the rest were offering me their daughters' hands and half their kingdoms. You don't get a story like that for nothing and you know it."

Henry shook his head, sadly. "I don't like to see this mercenary attitude in you, Andrew, truly I don't. But still . . . if you insist . . . I suppose we'll have to come to some financial arrangement." He sighed – the sigh of a man betrayed – and started out again.

Andrew said: "What's the difference between Bill Callow screwing me rigid and you screwing me rigid?"

Henry stopped again. "I'm your friend, Andrew," he said in a tone of surprise. "That's the difference." And then he went out.

Andrew got up. His head still ached, though not so badly as before and what he wanted most in the world right now was a drink. He went to the bar in the corner of the marquee and mixed himself a very stiff gin and tonic. The doctor would probably not recommend it for a man with suspected mild concussion but mild concussion, suspected or actual, was the least of his problems at the moment. He dropped a handful of half-melted ice cubes into the glass and took a deep, satisfying swig. He felt better at once.

From the entrance to the marquee Claudia said: "Hello, Andrew." Her voice was soft, hesitant, even a little shy.

He turned to face her. "Well, well, Judas Iscariot in a Laura Ashley dress. How nice."

She came over to join him by the bar. "Pour me a drink, will you? One like you've got."

As he busied himself with this task she said: "It wasn't my fault, Andrew."

"Oh, of course not. You weren't to know that batting your eyelashes and flashing your thighs at old Kaufman would get you my job."

"It wasn't like that," she said patiently. "It was entirely his idea and I don't care if you believe me or not because that's the truth. Charles wanted someone else to do the programme with you. I don't know why, though I don't think it was because he thought you were no good. Maybe he doesn't like you very much or maybe he just wanted change for its own sake. I mean, God, most changes on television are made simply because somebody thinks change is a good idea. Anyway, he asked me if I'd like to present the show with you and I'm pretty sure he asked me because I'd never done anything like that before and I'd be cheaper than anyone else."

"Yeah, well, usual thing," Andrew said, nodding. "Grab someone with no experience at all and throw 'em straight into the deep end and then stand around and see whether they sink or swim. That's the way TV works, all right."

Claudia sipped her drink, watching him gravely over the rim of the glass. "Yes. Well, that's about the size of it.

And . . . look, I'm not apologising. I've always wanted to be on the box and I've never made any secret of it and this was the kind of opportunity that might not have cropped up again for years. And, besides, I thought . . . I thought that if you had to share your programme with anyone you might prefer to share it with me."

"Well, you were wrong then, weren't you? It isn't a case of preference – I just didn't want to share it. And, anyway, you might have told me."

She watched him as he poured himself another drink. "You'd have liked that, would you? Me coming up to you, out of the blue, and saying, 'Oh, by the way, Andrew, move over. It's not your programme any more, it's ours'? Kaufman was the only person who could tell you, can't you see that? That's why I wanted to talk to you last night, after he'd seen you. I thought that if we could talk and discuss things it wouldn't seem quite so . . . quite so bloody awful for you."

He took a particularly deep gulp of his second gin. Already he was beginning to feel better, anaesthetised. Tomorrow he would probably feel terrible but at the moment he didn't care. "Yes, well, it's all academic now, isn't it? You've got the whole programme to yourself and good luck."

She put her hand on his. "Don't hate me, Andrew."

"I don't hate you," he said, surprised. "I thought you hated me."

"No, I don't hate you, Andrew," she said.

They both sat for a moment in silence, thoughtful. Then she said: "I bumped into Victoria outside. She told me about . . . well, about you and . . . and Laura and everything. You've had a rotten day, haven't you?"

"Not good," Andrew said. "I think, without too much trouble, I could remember better days."

"What are you going to do now?"

He laughed, though without much mirth. "I've no idea. I've no idea. I've just realised – I haven't even got anywhere to sleep tonight. Oh well, I suppose old Henry will put me up."

"Mmm." She poured more tonic into the very strong

gin he had given her. "I've been thinking about that and I wondered whether you'd like to stay at my place for a while. I mean, you'll be wanting to look for another job, go and see people and my flat is very central. It would be a good sort of base to operate from. And . . . oh, I don't know, it just seemed the least I could do in the circumstances."

It was an attractive idea, Andrew thought, a very, very attractive idea. Staying with Henry could only be a short term solution to his problems; he had to get away from the village, from Laura, from McCulper. So to be in London, to be near Claudia . . . He glanced covertly at her. The sun had brought out the freckles on her nose and cheeks; she looked to him even lovelier than usual. Of course, he thought further, there would be snags – watching her go off in the mornings, for instance, to do *his* job; wondering, as he sat around all day with nothing to do, what she was up to, whom she was with, what advances people like Mark Payne were making . . . And yet, just to be a lodger in her flat was far, far better than not to see her at all.

"Thanks," he said. "Yes, I'd like that."

"Well," she squinted down into her glass, "I don't suppose it will be for long. I mean, you're sure to get back into TV in no time."

Andrew rather doubted that. It seemed to him that a presenter who, as far as the general populace was concerned, had had a brainstorm or had been taken seriously drunk while on the air would be fractionally less in demand than a zero rating.

Some of that doubt obviously showed on his face because Claudia said, urgently: "I'm serious, Andrew. You're good and people know that. The programme's lousy and people know that, too, but you're good. And there's so little talent around that you're bound to get another chance."

Andrew was not convinced by her optimism but he had to concede that she was right on at least one point: there certainly was very little talent around. Television was so ubiquitous and the people who appeared on the

screen looked so small and insignificant, tucked away in the corner of the living room, that practically everyone in the world was convinced that he or she could do better. And yet amazingly few people were any good at all.

"Besides," she said, "what happened last night might even increase the demand for you. People who missed it will be eager to see what you're really like. I should think you'll be inundated with offers from chat shows and panel games because everyone will want to know whether you really are an uncontrollable sex maniac and . . ."

"Thanks," Andrew said.

She smiled. "And when they find you're not and when they realise what a good telly performer you are, well, I expect you'll end up with a show of your own."

Despite himself he found his spirits rising as optimism began to creep back. Maybe she was right. No, certainly she was right. He was young yet, he was talented . . . he could still come back. No, dammit, he *would* come back. He'd show them all and especially he'd show old Kaufman. "Thanks," he said. And this time he meant it.

Claudia said: "Then it's settled, is it? You'll come home with me tonight?"

"Yes."

She stood much as Victoria had done a little while earlier: neat head drooping a little on its slim neck, her hands clasped between her thighs, her toes turned inwards. The difference was that on Claudia the pose seemed natural, genuinely shy and, if not virginal, then at least as virginal as any modern, sexually liberated girl of her age had the right to look.

"There's just one thing," she said, her eyes still downcast. "I'm afraid there's only one bed in my flat and I don't have a couch. But it's quite a big bed, though, ever so wide. Do you think that will be all right?"

"Oh yes," Andrew said. "Oh yes, that will be absolutely all right."

Andrew Weston is having trouble with the women in his life. Suddenly, and for no apparent reason, they are throwing themselves at him from every direction. And Andrew, like the keen cricketer he is, feels obliged to catch them.

STICKY WICKET

This at a time when his life is already beset by complications. After all, the TV show he presents is looking shaky — and so is his marriage. His father-in-law is playing up and there is a crucial cricket match to be won. So who needs all these women? And why on earth is he being trailed by a man with a ginger wig, a false beard and an artificial le[illegible]

'Norman is writing about what h[illegible]ws best, and this gives his comic cuts [illegible]ity as well as verve . . . . A pleas[illegible]
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